

AYODHYA

THE CASE AGAINST THE TEMPLE

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Foreword

Foreword

The present book is my last contribution to the literature on what is known in India as "communalism", meaning the conflict between the different religions, principally Hinduism and Islam. Some of the authors whose works were published by Voice of India, notably Prof. Harsh Narain and Sri Suhas Majumdar, had only started speaking out on the communal question in the very last years of their lives. We must be grateful to them that they were willing to sacrifice their years of well-earned rest to a diagnosis of this unpleasant problem. I am very fortunate in having discovered the problem at an earlier stage of life and being offered a forum where I could contribute to the research into and reflection on its causes. In terms of my own potential, I feel I have exhausted the topic and I now intend to move on (or return) to more fundamental subjects of philosophy and religion.

My first book in this sphere of interest was *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid: A Case Study in HinduMuslim Conflict* (1990). I now find it a somewhat clumsy attempt to understand the Ayodhya controversy, but at the time it served a good purpose, viz. to break the false impression that the world of scholarship including Western Indologists was united in certifying that the Hindu claim to the disputed site in Ayodhya was historically unfounded. in the subsequent years, evidence has been piling up in favour of the Hindu claim. Coming full circle, I have included in this book a compilation of papers on various aspects of the Ayodhya debate written by me between 1995 and 2002. Its main focus is the argumentation and view of Hindu-Muslim history offered by the anti-temple party.

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1. The Ayodhya Debate: Focus on the "No Temple" Evidence

In May 1998, the World Archaeological Congress held a conference on the island of Brac, Croatia, where a session was devoted to the Ayodhya dispute. I had registered to read a paper, and though I couldn't make it to the conference due to unforeseen family matters, I had prepared the following text.

1.1.Two sides to the story

In references to the question whether there really was a Hindu temple at the Ayodhya site later covered by the Babri Masjid, the focus is invariably on the case made by the Hindu side, viz. that there was a temple, and that different types of evidence confirm this. The standard question is: is this evidence for the temple demolition scenario valid? Have they succeeded in proving the existence of the temple? By contrast, the *opponents* of the temple hypothesis are but very rarely asked to put their evidence on the table.

Let us now look at the anti-temple argumentation (with due attention to the several non-archaeological types of evidence)¹ and in particular to its offer of positive evidence that the allegedly demolished Hindu temple never existed. Of course, some might argue that it is impossible to prove the non-existence of something, and that it is therefore unreasonable to demand such proof.² But this argument is not valid: if there was no temple and no temple destruction, then there must have been something else at the site, some other history preceding the building of the mosque, which is exactly as capable of leaving some written or archaeological testimony as a demolished temple would. There is no need to prove the temples non-existence; it will do to prove the existence of something else at the site.

The disputed site is an elevated site near the centre of a city, quite well-known to a whole city population, so it is perfectly reasonable to expect the

existence of testimonies of any alternative history of the site. Thus, the site may have been covered with a forest and the city records mention its felling to make way for a mosque; or the owner of some secular building standing at the site sold his real estate to the builder of the projected mosque at a fair price, *vide* the written sales contract. As much as the temple party is expected to provide evidence for the temple, the non-temple party must provide evidence for the alternative to the temple.

Now, a close scrutiny of the argumentation by the nontemple party, whether by the Babri Masjid Action Committee, by the scholars representing it during the Government sponsored scholars debate of December-January 1990-91 (at least its last two meetings)³, or by independent scholars such as those of Jawaharlal Nehru University⁴ shows that none of them even formulates an alternative hypothesis. Not one of the numerous scholars who took up arms against the temple party has thought it necessary to explicate even in the vaguest terms what exactly happened before a mosque was built at the site. Much less does any of them provide any kind of evidence for such an alternative scenario, even though positive proof for a non-temple scenario would be the best possible refutation of the temple scenario.

1.2. Vanquishing a straw man

The non-temple argumentation is confined to two types of evidence: arguments from silence, and attempts to find fault with pieces of evidence offered by the temple party.

Criticism of the pro-temple argument is usually directed against a straw man, not against the actual argumentation as presented by pro-temple scholars. A number of much acclaimed anti-temple publications bravely announce in the introduction or on the cover that they will demolish every argument given (or concocted and maliciously propagated) by the temple party, but then fail to address or even mention the main statements of the pro-temple party. Thus, Asghar Ali Engineer has published two anthologies of articles on this controversy, but carefully leaves out the official as well as the competent non-official formulations of the protemple position; instead

he includes only a few clumsy ones to create a semblance of even-handedness.⁵

The most powerful non-official books by pro-temple scholars are simply never mentioned, let alone discussed.⁶ Even the official argumentation offered by the scholars mandated by the Vishva Hindu Parishad during the Government-sponsored debate is generally ignored.⁷ Gyanendra Pandey manages to leave all this argumentation by professional historians totally unmentioned in three successive publications purporting to deal with the Hindu way of doing history during the Ayodhya controversy, focusing instead on some Hindi pamphlets by local religious personnel totally unacquainted with scholarly historiography.⁸

The same ignoring of the very argumentation which is purportedly refuted is found in the successive editions of S. Gopals *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, for most foreign scholars the only accessible source on the Ayodhya conflict. Even the fact that a Government-sponsored debate between historians mandated by both sides took place is obscured in most publications, and when it is at all mentioned, it is mostly to denounce the fact that the Government had collaborated with the communal forces by giving them a hearing at all.

1.3. Case study of a straw man

The single, most important book in the whole Ayodhya controversy is Sita Ram Goels two-volume book *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*. Its first volume contains a number of presentations of specific cases of temple demolitions, a brief presentation of the Islamic theology of iconoclasm, and most of all a list of nearly 2,000 mosques standing on sites of temples demolished by Islamic iconoclasm.⁹ Everybody whispered that within the Ayodhya movement, a list of 3,000 demolished temples was circulating. The normal thing to do for serious historians would have been, to analyze this list inside out, and to try to refute it. After all, far from basing itself on myth, Goels argument consists of two thousand precise and falsifiable claims, as a scientific theory should. It turns out that none of the anti-temple historians has taken up the challenge of refuting even one of those claims, viz. by proving objectively that one of the mosques in the list

had definitely not been built in forcible replacement of a temple. The list has never been discussed and the book figures in practically no bibliography.¹⁰

Even more important is the second volume, *The Islamic Evidence*. It is the key to the whole Ayodhya controversy, no less. Its main parts are a 174-page compilation (emphatically not claiming completeness, merely the discovery of a tip of the iceberg) of Muslim literary and epigraphic evidence for the demolition of Hindu temples, and a 138-page presentation of the Islamic theology of iconoclasm. Goels comment on the compilation opens thus: Starting with Al-Biladhuri who wrote in Arabic in the second half of the ninth century, and coming down to Bashiruddin Ahmad who wrote in Urdu in the second decade of the twentieth, we have cited from seventy histories spanning a period of more than a thousand years. Our citations mention fifty kings, six military commanders and three sufis who destroyed Hindu temples in one hundred and seven localities¹¹

The importance of the book is that it provides the historical and ideological context of the temple demolitions: it demonstrates that the Ayodhya dispute is not a freak case but on the contrary an entirely representative case of a widespread and centuries-long phenomenon, viz. Islamic iconoclasm. It shows that the iconoclastic demolition of Hindu temples was practised in practically all Indian regions which were under Muslim rule at one time. Historians, particularly modern historians with their emphasis on context, ought to welcome it and study it closely. Instead, it has been completely obscured and kept out of the picture in the whole controversy.

It may have achieved mention in a footnote here or there. The longest discussion of it which I am aware of, is by political scientist Chetan Bhatt (who does not try to hide his ignorance about medieval history), who devotes fifteen lines to it: two separate lines in his text, and a 13-line footnote. He accuses Goel of a highly selective obsession with archaeology and to some extent anthropology¹², of marshalling the most selective archaeological and historical facts¹³, and of this: Goels text uses Islamic sources to prove that Mughals were only interested in religious domination

of Hindus and nothing more. The historical method used is based almost entirely on highly selective non-contextual quotations from these sources.¹⁴

It is of course very convenient to allege that embarrassing quotations are selective and pulled out of context, especially when you don't say what that context is, nor how it changes the meaning of the quotation. But here we are dealing with hundreds of quotations, requiring no less than an equal number of contexts to redeem them, to turn a testimony of fanatical vandalism into a testimony of tolerance. Moreover, it is normal for quotations to be selective (those in Bhatts own book, culled from writings by Hindu nationalist ideologues to put them in a bad light, certainly are); at any rate, quoting from primary sources is a decent form of scholarship. Incidentally, that the Mughals (meaning the Islamic invaders in general) were only interested in religious domination is a caricature misrepresenting Mr. Goels stated views; his point merely is that the religious motive provides an exhaustive and well-attested explanation for the observed fact of Islamic temple-demolishing campaigns.

Bhatt also claims that Goel provides evidence that the Black Stone in the Kaaba at Mecca (the most sacred site for Muslims) was originally a shrine to the Hindu God Shiva.¹⁵ In reality, Goel explicitly denies just that claim. He discusses a long-standing Hindu tradition to this effect, as well as testimonies of the mutual visits to each others temples by Pagan-Arab and Hindu traders and of the (well-founded) Muslim belief in a connection between Arab and Hindu polytheism, to the extent that the first Muslim invaders took great risks to reach and demolish the Somnath temple (Gujarat), in which they believed the Arab Goddesses had taken refuge after the Islamization of Arabia. At any rate, the presiding deity of the Kaaba, Hubal, was a male moon-god just like Shiva, and polytheists have always identified their own Gods with roughly corresponding deities in other pantheons.¹⁶ Goel explains how he always dismissed this belief as an invention of crank historians, until he ran into some new evidence, and even then he reserves his judgment: But in the course of the present study this author has run into some facts which force him to revise his judgment. He is *not prepared to say that the Kaba was a Shiva temple*. He, however, cannot resist the conclusion that it was a hallowed place of Hindu pilgrimage.¹⁷

Bhatt describes Goels book as a fairly typical RSS-Hindunationalist text.¹⁸ I challenge him to produce a similar text by a declared RSS man. Anyone familiar with the Hindu nationalist movement knows that (and knows why) the RSS scrupulously avoids this type of critical study of Islam as a doctrine. Since at least the Emergency (1975-77), when RSS activists were jailed and developed friendly relations with jailed activists of the jamaat-i-Islami, the RSS is wooing the Muslim community; its political ally, the BJP, is courting the Muslim voters and showing off its fast-increasing number of Muslim election candidates. Even when criticizing specified Muslim politicians or Islamic militants, the RSS and its allies firmly refuse to turn this into a criticism of Islam as such; rather, they will denounce their Muslim target as straying from the true message of Islam, which is a religion of peace and tolerance.

In the very book which Bhatt claims to be criticizing, Goel has taken the RSS-BJP leaders to task for precisely this proIslamic attitude: Hindu leaders have endorsed the Muslim propagandists in proclaiming that Islam does not permit the construction of mosques at sites occupied earlier by other peoples places of worship. One wonders whether this kowtowing to Islam is prompted by ignorance, or cowardice, or calculation, or a combination of them all. The Islam of which Hindu leaders are talking exists neither in the Quran nor in the Sunnah of the prophet.¹⁹ On other occasions as well, Goel has sternly criticized the RSS and BJP for their policy of eschewing all serious discussion of Islamic doctrine.²⁰ His book *Time for Stock-Taking* is the single most incisive critique of the RSS available; unlike the stereotyped and sloganeering tirades by Marxists like Chetan Bhatt, it is based on first-hand knowledge, including the testimonies by a number of disappointed RSS volunteers. In spite of this, political scientists like Bhatt can disregard all the evidence and label Goel as an RSS man.

Disregarding the evidence is indeed the name of the game. Critics of the Hindu historians case on Ayodhya have so far never looked their opponents in the eye, smugly settling for a labelling number, excelling in demonizing terminology *ad hominem* rather than in a factual analysis *ad rem*. It is historiographical nonsense to discuss the phenomenon of Islamic iconoclasm, in Ayodhya or elsewhere, without addressing the question of its

motivation - always an important aspect in any history of human behaviour. Yet, that is precisely what a whole establishment of Indian historians have done in suppressing the very mention (or in the case of Bhatt, at least the true contents) of Sita Ram Goels book.

1.4. The BMAC historians

The only (partial) exception to the solid front of scholarly disregard for the pro-temple argument is the official statement by the scholars mandated by the Babri Masjid Action Committee half-way through the Government-sponsored scholars debate.²¹ The story behind this is that the BMAC officials, no historians themselves, had shown up at the first meeting in December 1990, at which bundles of evidence would be exchanged, with nothing but a pile of photocopies of newspaper articles and book excerpts stating *opinions* on the Ayodhya dispute, but no historical evidence. The only solid material included pertained to the fairly uncontroversial judicial history of the site since 1857. My reading is that they had been misled into an unwarranted self-confidence by the assurance propagated by certain media-savvy academics that the pro-temple case was completely baseless and fraudulent. To their surprise, they were confronted with a genuine presentation of evidence by the pro-temple party, represented by Prof. Harsh Narain, Prof. B.P. Sinha, Dr. S.P. Gupta, Dr. B.R. Grover, and Mr. A.K. Chatteji (none of them formally associated with the Vishva Hindu Parishad except for Gupta).

In desperation, the BMAC representatives approached Prof. Irfan Habib of the Indian Council of Historical Research asking him to save them. Habib collected a team of genuine historians for them, led by Prof. R.S. Sharma. We will refer to these employees of the BMAC as the BMAC team, for it is in that capacity that they have participated in the debate, notwithstanding their initial attempt to be recognized as independent historians (as the BMAC negotiators have continued to call their own employees). Now that in spite of minimum coverage in the English-language Indian press, the impression was out that the VHP-mandated team of historians was winning the debate, the BMAC team had little choice but to address the pro-temple argumentation.

On 24 January 1991, when they were expected to present their case, Sharma and his team failed to show up and unilaterally broke off the talks. One could see the unilateral walk-out from the negotiations by the BMAC team as an admission of defeat. But the day before, the four BMAC historians, in their first meeting (chaired by a government representative) with the VHP team, had said that they needed six weeks to study the evidence, - a remarkable position for people who had led 40 colleagues into signing a public statement on the absolute non-existence of any evidence, just a few days before.

However, it must be admitted that they did make their homework as promised. A few months later they presented an argumentation under the title *Historians Report to the Nation*, which remained their central argument when the talks briefly resumed in October 1992. Then too, they broke off the talks, viz. in (arguably justified) protest against the VHPs announcement that, disregarding the ongoing negotiations, it would stage a demonstration in Ayodhya on December 6, the occasion when the Babri Masjid was demolished.

In the BMAC teams *Report*, the salient point is that the BMAC scholars exclusively attempted to refute (a part of) the pro-temple argumentation but made no attempt whatsoever to present any original evidence of their own. They had literally studied the evidence, meaning the evidence given by their opponents. In effect, they pretended to sit in judgment on evidence presented to them by supplicants, when in reality they themselves were one of the contending parties in the arena, expected to present their own evidence. Unfortunately, to keep both parties to the rules of a debate and to evaluate the evidence objectively, a genuinely neutral judge would have been needed, and of course, it seemed that there was no neutral judge available in India.

1.5. Arguments from silence

The central line of argument in the BMAC teams Report is that until the late 18th century, no literary source mentions a temple or a temple demolition at the site. Arguments from silence are always the weakest type of argument. The absence of testimony in a particular source may simply mean that the author was unaware of an event even though the event did

take place; or it can mean that the author had no intention of providing the kind of information which we are looking for, either deliberately or simply because he had a different project in mind when writing that particular text.

Thus, poet Tulsidas, author of the main devotional work on Rama in Hindi, the *Ramacharitmānas*, is often cited as remaining silent regarding the alleged temple demolition. But this proves little, when you keep in mind that in his day (ca.1600 A.D.) the construction of the Babri Masjid at the site (1528 A.D. according to the inscription on the mosque itself) was a long-accomplished fact, and that the same Tulsidas doesn't mention *any* of the numerous temple demolitions even in his own Varanasi. As a rewriter of ancient traditions, Tulsidas was just not a reporter on recent events at all; he does not even mention his own most famous contemporary, the more enlightened Emperor Akbar.

But in this case, there is an even more decisive argument against reliance on arguments from silence: each argument from silence against the temple is equally valid as an argument from silence against every possible alternative scenario, for none of the texts cited mentions any non-temple entity at the site. Every cited text which fails to mention a temple also fails to mention a forest or a secular building or any alternative at the site.

One frequently mentioned argument from silence is simply disingenuous: the absence of any reference to Ayodhya in Babar's memoirs. As Babar himself relates, the pages for the period when he may have stayed in Ayodhya were blown away during a storm. If those missing pages listed Babar's activities day by day and failed to mention his stay in Ayodhya, then that would constitute a serious argument from silence; but since those pages are missing, there is not even an argument from silence in Babar's memoirs.

1.6. A British concoction ?

But if there had never been a temple demolition, why did a tradition come into being asserting just that? Usually, this anomaly is explained by means of an *ad hoc* hypothesis, viz. that the temple demolition scenario was invented by the British rulers as part of their policy of divide and rule. Even pro-temple authors like K.R. Malkani, editor-in-chief of the party

paper *BJP Today*, have conceded an important role to this British divide and rule policy, which in my view is a figment of the imagination.

Admittedly, at the institutional level the British did follow a policy of divide and rule: communal recruitment quota and separate electorates for Muslims were obviously meant to isolate the Muslims from the national movement. In their conquest of India, the British had also used one community against another, e.g. they took help from the Sikhs, hereditary enemies of the Moghul Empire, to suppress the so-called Mutiny of 1857, which was a predominantly Muslim revolt aimed at restoring the Moghul Empire. However, in this process, they used *existing* antagonisms between communities and had no need of inventing new ones.

Moreover, it is simply not true at all that the British encouraged inter-religious rioting, nor that they exploited (let alone created) the kind of emotive issues (such as temple demolitions) which led to street fighting rather than to purely political disunity. Once the British-Indian Empire was securely established, the British rulers sought to establish communal peace, and did so with remarkable success. The period between 1858 and 1920, at the height of British power, saw the lowest incidence of Hindu-Muslim violence since the Ghorid invasion of 1192. When Hindu-Muslim riots started on a large scale in 1922, it was due to the failure of the illconceived Khilafat agitation started by the (Muslim and Congress Hindu) Indians themselves.

At any rate, not one of the proponents of the British concoction scenario has discovered even the faintest evidence for it in the copious colonial records. Remark, moreover, that this scenario implies a number of highly unlikely presuppositions. Thus, it imputes a great deal of stupidity to the wily Britons: it has them concoct a temple demolition scenario when so many factual, well-attested temple demolitions had marked Indias landscape, often in the form of temple remains being visibly incorporated in mosques built over them. In Ayodhya itself, several Rama temples were destroyed by Aurangzeb (*Treta-ka-Thakur* and *Swargdwar*), a fact which even the official polemicists against the Rama-Janmabhoomi have not dared to deny. If the British had wanted to poke up anti-Muslim feelings among

the Hindus of Ayodhya by means of temple demolition narratives, they had no need at all to go through the trouble of concocting one.

Further, this scenario credits the guardians of Hindu tradition with an uncharacteristic open-mindedness. All through the past centuries, Hindu Pandits have refused to listen to European scholars who claimed that the Sanskrit language had been brought from South Russia during the so-called Aryan Invasion, even though this Aryan Invasion Theory is taught in every schoolbook of history in India. These Pandits have consistently turned a deaf ear to European theories about Indian chronology, Sanskrit etymology or Aryan-Dravidian relations. They won't even allow non-Hindus into Hindu temples. Yet, we are asked to believe that a few British agents could infiltrate the local traditions and make these same Pandits swallow and then propagate a newly invented story about the birthplace of one of their greatest gods.

The British concoction hypothesis is conclusively refuted by several pre-British testimonies of (at least the belief in) the temple demolition scenario. The best-known and clearest testimony is certainly the one by the Austrian Jesuit Tieffenthaler, who wrote in 1768: Emperor Aurangzeb got demolished the fortress called Ramcot, and erected on the same place a Mahometan temple with three cupolas. Others believe that it was constructed by Babor.²² One could speculate, along with R.S. Sharma and his BMAC team of historians, that the tradition which Tieffenthaler recorded, was a concoction from the early 18th century (still in its initial phase of creation)²³, but it cannot, at any rate, have been a British concoction.

To their credit, R.S. Sharma and his team are the only ones in the no-temple camp to have abandoned the British concoction hypothesis, at least implicitly. But they fail to give the elements which could lend substance to a pre-British concoction hypothesis: no who, no how, no why. And no evidence whatsoever.

1.7. A closer look at the arguments from silence

While Sharma c.s. leave undiscussed several pre-British testimonies which the VHP-mandated team had brought as evidence, they do mention a

few other sources of this type nonetheless. In each case, they claim it as an argument from silence: the source fails to mention the pre-existence or the demolition of a temple at the site. But each of these Ayodhya related passages cited is very brief and fails to mention other buildings in Ayodhya, and none of the texts cited purports to be a history of temple demolitions, so that the non-mention of a birthplace temple is quite in keeping with the project of the texts concerned, and not a telling omission.

Thus, Abul Fazls *Ain-i-Akbari*, completed in A.D. 1598. Sharma c.s. note that it includes Ayodhya among the foremost places of pilgrimage, calling it one of the holiest places of antiquity and the residence of Ramchander, and mentioning the celebration of *Ram Nomi* (Ramas birth festival) there. The BMAC historians comment: Clearly, the tradition till then did not confine Ramas place of birth to the existing town of Ayodhya, let alone the site occupied by the Baburi Masjid.²⁴

But this is hardly incompatible with a tradition concerning a specific birthplace. Till today, people can say: Im from Scotland, or: I was born in Edinburgh, rather than to tell you in exactly which house or maternity ward they were born. When filling out forms, people still write the name of the town behind the entry place of birth, and not the full address of the building; yet in doing so, they are not denying that they were born in that specific building. You really have to be a university professor to come up with the brilliant idea that people who mention a town as their place of birth are implying that they have no notion of having been born in one specific house.

Anyone familiar with the lore of Hindu devotional tradition would find it strange that Hindus would come on pilgrimage to Ayodhya as Ramas city and not let that Rama association come alive in an enactment of Ramas career with the designation of specific sites as the theatres of specific scenes in Ramas life. That, for example, is why another temple in Ayodhya was associated with Ramas death: the *Swargadwar*, gate to heaven. Even if Rama were a purely fictional character, the religious imagination would have created that kind of landscape, and in the Bhakti period, i.e. from well before the start of the second Christian millennium, it was the done thing to adorn such religiously meaningful sites with temples.

Sharma c.s. assume that the identification of the demolished building as a fortress (*Ramkot*, Ramas fortress) refutes the assumption that it was a temple; but Hindu idol-worshippers consider a temple as the house of the deity, in the case of a warrior-deity as his fortress. The whole idea of idol-worship is to make a deity come alive, realistically: the idol is washed and clothed and fed, and of course it lives in a house appropriate to the gods character and epic career.

1.8. On balance

So, in spite of sometimes painstaking attempts to neutralize the evidence presented by the temple party, the proponents of the non-temple hypothesis have only come up with some highly contrived readings of some of the VHP-mandated scholars items of evidence, not with a convincing refutation. Moreover, they have completely failed to produce any positive evidence for a non-temple scenario. This observation raises a few questions.

First of all: why is there an Ayodhya debate in the first place? Normally, scholars only take time from their busy schedules to reopen a settled affair when fresh evidence has surfaced which throws a new light on the matter. In this case, no such new evidence has ever been presented. It is most conspicuous by its absence in the opening shot of the debate, the JNU historians pamphlet *The Political Abuse of History* (Delhi 1989). Had there not been the purely political motives which drove some to declare the Ayodhya debate opened, we would still have been with the consensus of 1989 as laid down in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1989 edition, entry *Ayodhya*): Ramas birthplace is marked by a mosque erected by the Moghul emperor Babur in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple.

Secondly: what is the score if each one of the attempted refutations of the items of pro-temple evidence proves correct, and if the non-answered items of evidence were likewise to be refuted? In that case, the pro-temple evidence is reduced to zero, but that would still make it exactly as voluminous as the evidence for every possible non-temple scenario, which to date is non-existent. Even if all the trouble taken by the pro-temple scholars had been in vain, their evidence would still be equal in magnitude to the evidence offered by their opponents, whose endeavour has been

purely negative. Anyone weighing the actual evidence presented by both sides would have to infer that the balance of evidence, while not yet definitive, is strongly on the pro-temple side.

1.9. Tampering with the evidence

Before concluding, we want to register a remark on a minor but quite significant chapter in the exchange of evidence: the VHP-mandated scholars have, in their argumentation, pointed out no less than four attempts where scholars belonging to the anti-temple party have tried to conceal or destroy documentary evidence. Those are of course cases where the attempt failed because it was noticed in time, but the question must be asked how many similar attempts have succeeded. At any rate, there has not been any attempt from the anti-temple side to counter or even deny these four specific allegations. They have also not been able to point out any similar attempt by the pro-temple party to tamper with the record.

With one possible exception: immediately after the announcement of the discovery, in the post-demolition debris on 6-7 December 1992, of Hindu sculptures and an inscription explicitly supporting the temple thesis, seventy academics issued a statement alleging that this evidence had been stolen from museums and planted there. Since then, the allegation has resurfaced every time the archaeological evidence was mentioned. It has also been stealthily expanded to include the dozens of temple-sculpture pieces found during public works at around the Babri Masjid in June 1992. Well, who knows. if proof is offered, we will have to consider it.

So far, however, this attack against the professional integrity of the scholars who presented these findings (grouped in the *Historians Forum* chaired by Prof. K.S. Lal) remains unsubstantiated. Unless proven, the allegation is a case of defamation. In the six years since then, this archaeological material has been in the custody of politicians openly hostile to the Hindu Revivalist movement, who would gladly have made the material available for inspection by scholars capable of proving the allegation (especially Human Resources Minister Arjun Singh, 1991-96). If the anti-temple academics really believed their own allegations, they could not have dreamed of a better occasion to expose the mendacity of their opponents, than to invite an international panel of experts to investigate the

archaeological pieces and prove their fraudulent origins. Instead, they continued their bluffing and shouting and kept the publics attention as far away from the evidence as possible.

1.10. The politics behind the debate

The political equation behind all this intrigue is rarely understood by non-Indians. Thus, it requires quite a historical excursus to explain why declared Marxists like Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma and Romila Thapar are making common cause with Islamic fundamentalism in its struggle against Hindu pluralism.²⁵ Leaving aside the larger framework of the alliances and power equations in Indias political arena, we may for now draw attention to a significant asymmetry in the political backgrounds of the pro- and anti-temple parties.

Reducing the belief in the preexistence of a Hindu temple at the site to a political agenda is, apart from being a case of the genetic fallacy, also counterfactual. Among those who uphold the temple thesis, you find scholars who did not support the movement for replacing the mosque structure with temple architecture, and who explicitly distanced themselves from the Vishva Hindu Parishads campaign, e.g. Prof. A.R. Khan and archaeologist Dr. R. Nath. By contrast, I am not aware of anyone in the anti-temple party who supported the right of Hindus to build a temple at the site: every one of them explicitly subscribes to the position that Hindu attempts to reclaim this Hindu sacred site should be thwarted.

Of course, the opponents of the replacement of the Babri Masjid (already back in use as a Hindu temple since 1949) with new temple architecture could have taken that political stand without dragging in the historical question, e.g.: The fact that a Hindu temple stood at the site still does not give Hindus the right to claim it back. Some of them have indeed fallen back on that position when they saw they were losing the debate on the historical evidence. But in 1989-91, the field seemed ripe for the more aggressive position, which was to deny the Hindu history of the site altogether; nobody had expected that the VHP would be capable (and in effect, it was not capable, but it found some independent scholars who were capable) of collecting and presenting the available as well as some newly-found evidence for the temple.

The VHP-mandated scholars, for their part, have not been aggressive enough to take the struggle into the enemy half of the field by focusing public attention on the quality of the evidence presented by the BMAC-mandated scholars and their allies in academe and the media. That is why the latter have gotten away with creating the false impression, at least among those unacquainted with the actual contents of the debate, that the pro-temple case is weak and fraudulent while, purely by implication, their own case must be unassailable.

1.1 1. The role of foreign scholars

It is not reassuring to watch the ease with which foreign scholars have absorbed or adopted the non-temple thesis from their Indian colleagues (whom they assume to be neutral observers) even without being shown any positive evidence. In academic circles in the West, my own restating the *status quaestionis* in terms of actual evidence has only earned me hateful labels and laughter, and this from big professors at big universities whose prestige is based on the widespread belief that scholarship goes by hard evidence, not politically fashionable opinions. Never has any of them offered hard evidence for the newly dominant view, or even just shown a little familiarity with the contents of the debate.

Until 1989, there was a consensus about the existence of a medieval Hindu temple and its destruction by Islamic iconoclasm. Western scholars who did primary research, notably the Dutch scholars Hans Bakker and Peter van der Veer, found nothing which gave reason to question that consensus. Had they cared to follow the debate in India, they would have looked in vain for the presentation by the no-temple party of any historical or archaeological fact which is radically incompatible with (and thereby constitutes a refutation of) that consensus view.

A painful example of a scholar intimidated into conformity by the demonization of the temple thesis can be witnessed in this climbdown by Peter van der Veer, who had at first accepted the preexistence of the Ayodhya temple on the basis of the local tradition: While Bakker and I could naively accept local tradition, this cannot be done any longer.²⁶ In fact, the local oral history was confirmed by other types of evidence as presented by B.B. Lal, S.P. Gupta, Harsh Narain et al., but none of these are

known to Van der Veer (as per his own text and bibliography) because his only source turns out to be S. Gopals *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, which conceals the pro-temple evidence.

More importantly, because of their implicit support to the old consensus view of the temple demolition, Van der Veer and Bakker have been attacked *nomination* in S. Gopals book,²⁷ which falsely associates them with the Hindu fundamentalist bad guys all while diverting attention from the historical evidence, which it spurns as pointless.²⁸ Being associated with Hindu fundamentalism is about the worst defamation one can inflict on an Indologist, and this is most likely the sole reason for Van der Veers change of heart. At any rate, he offers no historical evidence at all which could justify his retreat from the well-established consensus.

1.12. Conclusion

Future historians will include the no-temple argument of the 1990s as a remarkable case study in their surveys of academic fraud and politicized scholarship. With academic, institutional and media power, a new academic-journalistic consensus has been manufactured denying the well-established history of temple demolition by Islamic iconoclasm to the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi site; at least among people with prestige and influence but no firsthand knowledge of the issue. But the facts will remain the facts, and their ongoing suppression is bound to give way as new generations of scholars take a fresh look at the data.

Footnotes:

¹On the archaeological aspect, see *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition* by Prof. D. Mandal, Delhi 1993, and *Archaeology of Babri Masjid*, Genuine Publ., Delhi 1994, by Mrs. Surinder Kaur and Mr. Sher Singh, amateurs with whom other anti-temple authors like Sushil Srivastava have refused to be associated; and on the pro-temple side, the *Babari Masjid of Ayodhya* by R. Nath, Jaipur 1991.

²E.g. S. Guhan in Jitendra Bajaj, ed.: *Ayodhya and the Future India*, Madras 1993, p.89.

³R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report to the Nation*, Peoples Publ., Delhi 1991. To my knowledge, the argumentation offered by the BMAC office bearers themselves during the first round of the talks, in December 1990, was never published.

⁴S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, K.N. Panikkar, Bipan Chandra et al.: *The Political Abuse of History*, JNU 1989; and S. Gopal, ed.: *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, 2nd ed., Penguin 1992.

⁵A.A. Engineer: *Babri Masjid Ramjanmabhoomi Controveiy*, Ajanta, Delhi 1990, and *Politics of Confrontation*, idem 1992.

⁶E.g. Harsh Narain: *The Ayodhya Temple-Mosque Dispute*, Perunam, Delhi 1993, and S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*, vol.2, The Islamic Evidence, Voice of India, Delhi 1991.

⁷Available in two editions: The Great Ramjanmabhoomi Emence, VHP, Delhi 1991, and *History vs. Casuistry*, Voice of India, Delhi 1991.

⁸Gyanendra Pandey: *Hindus and Others*, Viking/Penguin 1993, p.9-10; New Hindu History of Ayodhya, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18-6-1994; The New Hindu History, in J. McGuire, P. Reeves & H. Brasted: *Politics of Violence*, Sage Publ., Thousands Oaks, Colorado 1996, p. 143-158.

⁹This first volume includes articles by Harsh Narain, Ram Swarup, Jai Dubashi and Arun Shourie, apart from the main body by Goel himself. In appendix, it also reproduces a list of Hindu temples demolished in Bangladesh in autumn 1989, prepared by the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council of Bangladesh, as if to prove that Islamic iconoclasm is not ancient history.

¹⁰In a review in the Calcutta *Telegraph* (ca. 30-1-1991), Manini Chatterjee of the Communist Party (Marxist) calls *Hindu Temples*, vol. 1, (along with my own book *Ramjanmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid*) a very bad book, but fails to even attempt a refutation.

¹¹S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2, p.266-267 of the first edition, the one which Chetan Bhatt (*cfr. infra*) uses; there is a much-expanded second edition (1994) citing 10 more histories, and mentioning quite a few more kings, military commanders, sufis and localities.

¹²C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity. Race, New Religious Movements and the Ethics of Post modernity*, UCL Press, London 1997, p. 169.

¹³C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p. 175.

¹⁴C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.278.

¹⁵C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p. 278.

¹⁶E.g. in his *De Bello Gallico*, Julius Caesar identified the Celtic gods with the Roman gods familiar to his readers. Likewise, a Muslim commentator of the Quran (Md. Faruq Khan: *Qurân Masjîd* in Hindi, Rampur 1976, p.242, quoted by Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol. 2, p.364) identifies the Arab Goddesses Al-Lât, Al-Manât and Al-Uzza typologically with Hindu Goddesses like Saraswati and Lakshmi.

¹⁷S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (1st ed.), p.429.

¹⁸C. Bhatt: *Liberation and Purity*, p.278.

¹⁹S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (1st ed.), p.ii.

²⁰See S.R. Goel, ed.: *Time for Stocktaking: whether sangh parivar?* Voice of India, Delhi 1997.

²¹R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report to the Nation*, cf. supra, largely copied in Pradeep Nayak: *The Politics of the Ayodhya Dispute*, Commonwealth, Delhi 1993.

²²Quoted by R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report*, p.19, italicizing the words the fortress.

²³R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report*, p.20.

²⁴R.S. Sharma et al.: *Historians Report*, p.16.

²⁵Thapar and Sharma are quoted as representatives of Indian Marxism in Tom Bottomores *History of Marxist Thought*, Oxford 1988, entry Hinduism; Habib has subtitled his recent book *Essays in Indian History* (Tulika, Delhi 1995) as *Towards a Marxist Perception*.

²⁶P. van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p. 161. Reference is to his book Gods on Earth, London 1988, and to Hans Bakkers book *Ayodhya*, Groningen 1986.

²⁷S. Gopal: *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p.30.

²⁸S. Gopal, ed.: *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p.20.

2. Ashoka and Pushyamitra, Iconoclasts?

One of the diversionary tactics employed by the eminent historians in order to shield Islamic iconoclasm from the public eye is to allege that Hinduism itself is the guilty religion, viz. of persecuting minority religions such as Buddhism. So much is this accusation now taken for granted, that any attempt to stick to the historical record fills the secularists with exasperation at such Hindu fanatical blindness. Thus, Tavleen Singh challenges us: Try, for instance, to get a BJP leader to admit that Hindus did to Buddhist shrines pretty much what Muslims were later to do with Hindu temples and you will find that it is nearly impossible.¹

Sadly, some Buddhists have taken the bait and interiorized this line of anti-Hindu polemic, which also ties in neatly with the pro-Buddhist bias in Nehruvian and Western Indology. How painfully ungrateful. While Hinduism has received from Islam nothing but murder and destruction, Buddhism owes a lot to Hinduism. Apart from its very existence, it has received from Hinduism toleration, alms by Hindu laymen, sons and daughters of Hindus to fill its monasteries and nunneries, land grants and funding by Hindu rulers, protection by Hindu rulers against lawlessness and against the Islamic invaders between the mid-7th and the late 12th century. In many cases, Buddhist temples formed part of large pluralist temple-complexes, and Hindu codes of art and architecture dealt with Buddha on a par with Shiva and other objects of depiction and worship.²

Whatever the facts, we are now faced with a massive propaganda alleging Hindu persecution of Buddhism. Let us study one example: the story of alleged Hindu persecution of Buddhism by Pushyamitra, a general in the service of the declining Maurya dynasty, who founded the Sunga dynasty after a *coup détat*. This story provides the standard secularist refutation of the myth that Hinduism has always been tolerant.

Thus, the Marxist historian Gargi Chakravartty writes: Another myth has been meticulously promoted with regard to the tolerance of the Hindu rulers. Let us go back to the end of second century B.C. *Divyavadana*, in a text of about the second-third century A.D., depicts Pushyamitra Shunga as a great persecutor of Buddhists. In a crusading march with a huge army he destroyed stupas, burnt monasteries and killed monks. This stretched up to Shakala, i.e. modern Sialkot, where he announced a reward of 100 gold coins to the person who would bring the head of a Buddhist monk. Even if this is an exaggeration, the acute hostility and tensions between Pushyamitra and the monks cannot be denied.³

We need not comment on Chakravarttys misreading of *Divyāvadāna* as a persons name rather than a book title. Remark the bias in the assumption that the supposedly undeniable conflict between the king and the monks proves the kings intolerance; for what had been their own contribution to the conflict? When Shivaji had a conflict with the Brahmins (a well-known episode)⁴, all secularists and most Hindus blame the wily, greedy Brahmins; there is no good reason why the Buddhist monks should, by contrast, be assumed to be blameless when they came in conflict with a king.

The story is in fact given in two near contemporaneous (2nd century A.D.) Buddhist histories, the *Asokāvadāna* and the *Divyāvadāna*; the two narratives are almost verbatim the same and very obviously have a common origin.⁵ This non-contemporary story (which surfaces more than three centuries after the alleged facts) about Pushyamitras offering money for the heads of Buddhist monks is rendered improbable by external evidence: the well-attested historical fact that he allowed and patronized the construction of monasteries and Buddhist universities in his domains, as well as the still-extant stupa of Sanchi.⁶ After Ashokas lavish sponsorship of Buddhism, it is perfectly possible that Buddhist institutions fell on slightly harder times under the Sungas, but persecution is quite another matter. The famous historian of Buddhism Etienne Lamotte has observed: To judge from the documents, Pushyamitra must be acquitted through lack of proof.⁷

In consulting the source texts I noticed a significant literary fact which I have not seen mentioned in the scholarly literature (e.g. Lamotte, just quoted), and which I want to put on record. First of all, a look at the critical

edition of the *Asokāvadāna* (Illustrious Acts of Ashoka) tells a story of its own concerning the idealization of Buddhism in modern India. This is how Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya, the editor of the *Asokāvadāna*, relates this works testimony about Ashoka doing to a rival sect that very thing of which Pushyamitra is accused later on:

At that time, an incident occurred which greatly enraged the king. A follower of the Nirgrantha (Mahāvīra) painted a picture, showing Buddha prostrating himself at the feet of the Nirgrantha. Ashoka ordered all the Ajivikas of Pundravardhana (North Bengal) to be killed. In one day, eighteen thousand Ajivikas lost their lives. A similar kind of incident took place in the town of Pataliputra. A man who painted such a picture was burnt alive with his family. *It was announced that whoever would bring to the king the head of a Nirgrantha would be rewarded with a dīnāra (a gold coin).* As a result of this, thousands of Nirgranthas lost their lives.⁸ Only when Vitashoka, Ashokas favourite Arhat (an enlightened monk, a Theravada-Buddhist saint), was mistaken for a Nirgrantha and killed by a man desirous of the reward, did Ashoka revoke the order.

Typically, Mukhopadhyaya refuses to believe his eyes at this demythologization of the secular emperor Ashoka: This is one of the best chapters of the text. The subject, the style, the composition, everything here is remarkable. In every *shloka* there is a poetic touch.(...) But the great defect is also to be noticed. Here too Ashoka is described as dreadfully cruel. If the central figure of this story were not a historic personage as great and well-known as Ashoka, we would have nothing to say. To say that Ashoka, whose devotion to *all* religious sects is unique in the history of humanity (as is well-known through his edicts) persecuted the Jains or the Ajivikas is simply absurd. And why speak of Ashoka alone? There was no Buddhist king anywhere in India who persecuted the Jains or the Ajivikas or any other sect.⁹

Contrary to Mukhopadhyayas confident assertion, there are a few attested cases of Buddhist-Jain conflict. The *Mahāvamsa* says that the Buddhist king Vattagamini (2917 B. C.) in Sri Lanka destroyed a Jain vihara. In the Shravana-Belgola epitaph of Mallishena, the Jain teacher Akalanka says that after a successful debate with Buddhists, he broke a Buddha statue with

his own foot.¹⁰ The same (rare, but not non-existent) phenomenon of Buddhist fanaticism can be found outside India: the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia is associated with a forceful suppression of the native Shamanism.¹¹ In recent decades in Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks have been instrumental in desecrating and demolishing Hindu temples. None of this proves that Buddhist doctrine incites its followers to persecution of non-Buddhists, but neither should anything human be considered alien to Buddhist human beings.

Mukhopadhyayas refusal to face facts about Ashokas misconduct just goes to show how far the idealization of Buddhism and Ashoka has gotten out of hand in Nehruvian India. When the modern myth of Ashoka as the great secular Buddhist ruler is contradicted by an ancient source, even one outspokenly favourable to Buddhism and Ashoka, which shows him persecuting rival schools of thought, the modern scholar (a Hindu Brahmin by birth) still insists on upholding the myth, and dismisses the actual information in the ancient source as a great defect.

It is at the end of the *Asokāvadāna* that we find the oft-quoted story that Pushyamitra offered one *dīnāra* for every *sramanasirah*, head of a Buddhist monk.¹² Not that he got many monks killed, for, according to the account given, one powerful Arhat created monks heads by magic and gave these to the people to bring to Pushyamitras court, so that they could collect the award without cutting off any real monks head. So, even according to the only story cited as source for Pushyamitras persecution, the Hindu villain is a ridiculous failure at killing Buddhists.

At any rate, the striking fact, so far not mentioned in the Pushyamitra controversy, is that the main line of the narrative making the allegation against Pushyamitra is a carbon copy of the just-quoted account of Ashokas own offer to pay for every head of a monk from a rivalling sect. Hagiographies are notorious for competitive copying (e.g. appropriating the miracle of another saint, multiplied by two or more, for ones own hero); in this case, it may have taken the form of attributing a negative feat of the hero onto his enemy.

But there are two differences. Firstly, in the account concerning Pushyamitra, a miracle episode forms a crucial element, and this does not add to the credibility of the whole. And secondly, Ashoka belongs to the writers own Buddhist camp, whereas Pushyamitra is described as an enemy of Buddhism. When something negative is said about an enemy (i.c. Pushyamitra), it is wise to reserve ones acceptance of the allegation until independent confirmation is forthcoming; by contrast, when a writer alleges that his own hero has committed a crime, there is much more reason to expect the allegation to be correct. In the absence of external evidence, the best thing we can do for now is to draw the logical conclusion from the internal evidence: the allegation against Pushyamitra is much less credible than the allegation against Ashoka.

Mukhopadhyaya can only save Ashokas secular reputation by accusing the *Asokāvadāna* author of a lie, viz. of the false allegation that Ashoka had persecuted Nirgranthas. Unfortunately, a lie would not enhance the authors credibility as a witness against Pushyamitra, nor as a witness for the laudable acts of Ashoka which make up a large part of the text. So, Mukhopadhyaya tries to present this lie (which only he himself alleges) as a hagiographically acceptable type of lie: in order to show the greatness of Buddhism, the orthodox author degraded it by painting the greatest Buddhist of the world as a dreadful religious fanatic.¹³

However, contrary to Mukhopadhyayas explanation, there is no hint in the text that the author meant to show the greatness of Buddhism by painting the greatest Buddhist as a religious fanatic. By this explanation, Mukhopadhyaya means that the writer first made Ashoka commit a great crime (the persecution of the Nirgranthas) to illustrate the greatness of Buddhism by sheer contrast, viz. as the factor which made Ashoka give up this crime. There is an famous analogy for this: the cruelty of Ashokas conquest of Kalinga was exaggerated by scribes in order to highlight the violence-renouncing effect of Ashokas subsequent conversion to Buddhism. But in this passage, Buddhism plays no role in Ashokas change of heart: it is only the sight of his own friend, killed by mistake, which makes him revoke the order. And it is his commitment to Buddhism which prompts Ashoka to persecute the irreverent Nirgranthas in the first place.

Buddhism does not gain from this account, and if a Buddhist propagandist related it nonetheless, it may well be that it was a historical fact too well-known at the time to be omitted. By contrast, until proof of the contrary, the carbon-copy allegation against Pushyamitra may very reasonably be dismissed as sectarian propaganda. But a 20th-century Hindu scholar will twist and turn the literary data in order to uphold a sectarian and miracle-based calumny against the Hindu ruler Pushyamitra, and to explain away a sobering testimony about the fanaticism of Ashoka, that great secularist patron of Buddhism. Such is the quality of the scholarship deployed to undermine the solid consensus that among the world religions, Hinduism has always been the most tolerant by far.

Footnotes:

¹Tavleen Singh: *Running out of control*, Indian Express, 25-7-1993.

²E.g. Varahamihira: *Brihatsamhitā*, ch.57, 59.

³Gargi Chakravartty BJP-RSS and Distortion of History, in Pratul Lahiri, ed.: *Selected Writings on Communalism*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi 1994, p. 166-167.

⁴J. Sarkar: *Shivaji and his Times*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1992 (1919), p.161, 165-167.

⁵Avadāna, narrative, is the Buddhist equivalent of Purāna.
Divyāvādāna = divine narrative.

⁶The same argument exists in the reverse direction concerning the Kushana king Kanishka (1st-2nd century A.D.). This patron of Mahayana Buddhism is sometimes accused of persecuting Brahmins, but the sparse physical testimony argues against this: on his coins, he honoured Greek, Zoroastrian and Brahmanic deities along with the Buddha.

⁷E. Lamotte: *History of Indian Buddhism*, Institut Orientaliste, Louvain-la-Neuve 1988 (1958), p. 109.

⁸S. Mukhopadhyaya: *The Ashokavadana*, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi 1963, p.xxxvii. In footnote, Mukhopadhyaya correctly notes that the author seems to have confused the Nirgranthas (Jains) with the Ajivikas, a similar ascetic sect. Nirgrantha = freed from fetters, a Jaina.

⁹S. Mukhopadhyaya: *The Ashokavadana*, p.xxxviii. In fact, the non-persecution of other religions, claimed here for Ashoka against the very evidence under discussion, was not unique at all: it was the rule among Hindu kings throughout history, and the Buddha himself had been one of its beneficiaries.

¹⁰Both instances cited by S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (2nd ed.), p.413, with reference to *Epigraphica Indica*, vol.3, p.192 and p.201.

¹¹Piers Vitebsky: *De sjamaan*, Kosmos, Utrecht 1996 (1995), p. 135.

¹²S. Mukhopadhyaya: *The Ashokavadana*, p.134.

¹³S. Mukhopadhyaya: *The Ashokavadana*, p.xxxviii.

3. The Bodh Gaya Temple Controversy

When anti-Hindu lobbies unite, they often manage to get the contemporary form of Indian Buddhism on their side, viz. Ambedkarite neo-Buddhism. Because of its political background, the conversion of Scheduled Caste leader Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and many of his Mahar castemen to Buddhism (1956), in effect contributed to the genesis of what one might call Buddhist communalism.¹ The anti-Hindu bias of Ambedkarite Buddhism was strengthened by the parallel Buddhist animus against Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka and Burma/Myanmar, as well as by the tendency among Nehruvian intellectuals to construe Buddhism historically as an anti-Hindu revolt. As a materialization of this anti-Hindu animus, the neo-Buddhist movement has tried to create controversies over certain temples in imitation of the Ayodhya temple/mosque controversy.

In particular, the Ambedkarite neo-Buddhists have started a movement for the liberation of the Mahabodhi shrine in Bodh Gaya. Its aim is to remove the statutory four Hindu members of the eight-member temple management committee, and to prohibit worship of a *sivalingam* in the temple. Quite in contrast with the secularist calls for composite culture and for multi-religious worship at the Rama-Janmabhoomi site, this is a demand to free the Mahabodhi site from multi-religious worship and particularly from the taint of Hinduism. The agitation has been marked by petty vandalism, as when the neo-Buddhists desecrated their own holiest site, or at least the *sivalingam* standing there, in October 1992.

One of the strange things about this agitation is that it revives a conflict which had been solved several decades earlier. Since 1590, Shaiva monks had taken care of the temple, which had been abandoned by Buddhists after the massacre of the Buddhist monks by Muslim invaders in ca. A.D. 1192. In 1874, they agreed to the Burmese kings proposal to re-establish the building as a Buddhist place of worship. But the Anglo-Burmese War and several foreign interventions spoiled the project.

In 1890-92, Edwin Arnold, author of the Buddha romance *The Light of Asia*, appealed to the British-Indian Government to hand over the temple to the Buddhists, and even went to Japan to plead for diplomatic support to this demand. A court case ensued which the Buddhists ultimately lost. Negotiations dragged on, involving Swami Vivekananda (1901) and Hindu Mahasabha leader Bhai Parmanand (1935), among others. A compromise proposal by Rajendra Prasad (1924), later on President of India, was thwarted several times but finally became law in 1949: the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, which gives both Hindus and Buddhists the right to worship and an equal representation in the management committee.²

So, the goal of the Bodh Gaya temple movement is not to get the Buddhists in (they are in since 1949), only to get the Hindus out. Given the existing compromise and the Hindu record in tending the building after the Buddhists had abandoned it, Hindus consider this Buddhist campaign graceless and ungrateful.

The movement for the liberation of the Mahabodhi temple was formally launched by a Japanese monk, Bhadant Arya Nagarjuna Surai Sasai. His involvement provides a typical example of how people spoiling for a fight tend to attack meek rather than dangerous adversaries. Buddhism has been eclipsed by Christianity in South Korea and among the Indonesian Chinese.³ In Bangladesh, the Buddhist Chakmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been driven out by the Muslim settlers and the Government of Bangladesh. Buddhism is oppressed by Communism in China, North Korea, Tibet and Vietnam. If Sasai had started a similar agitation in those countries, it would not have lasted a single day, and he would have been lucky to get expelled rather than locked up or killed.

By contrast, Buddhism is not oppressed or endangered in India. It is not obstructed in worshipping at its traditional sacred sites, including the Mahabodhi temple, which Hindus have made available for Buddha worship. India provides shelter to the Dalai Lama, and has sanctioned the creation of a network of Buddhist monasteries and institutes, including a Tibetan-Buddhist university (in Sarnath) and the nerve centres of several international Buddhist organizations. It welcomes Buddhist associations from Japan, Taiwan and other countries and allows them to build pilgrim

hostels and research institutes in Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and other Buddha-related sites. It is, moreover, one of the few countries where even most non-Buddhists have a sincere respect for the Buddha and his Dharma. And yet, of all places, India is the one where Arya Sasai has to liberate Buddhism from Hindu oppression.

Arya Sasai reported thus on the high point of his campaign: On October 14 [1992], a big rally was held at the Boat Club, New Delhi, and over 3 lakh Buddhists of India and foreign countries attended it.⁴ In the next few years, however, nothing much happened, because Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wifely successor Rabri Devi went back on an earlier promise of support to the Buddhist agitation. Another agitation, with indefinite hunger-strike, took place in November 1995, but with no results.⁵ The RSS claims credit for mobilizing the Hindu opposition, but the main point is probably that the Backward Castes inside Laloo Prasad Yadav's own party (Janata Dal, now Rashtriya Janata Dal) are not as insensitive to Hindu concerns as some political scientists always assume in their fevered dreams of a big anti-Brahmin alliance.

The equation of Ayodhya with Bodh Gaya, commonly made in the press, is not tenable at all. Hindus never destroyed the Mahabodhi temple, they never took it from the Buddhists, they have handed it over for Buddhist worship in a settlement piloted by the Hindu Mahasabha, and they are not interfering nor claiming a right to interfere with Buddhist practices there. More than that, a Buddhist member of the Bodh Gaya temple management committee has admitted that the laudable work of the construction of the Mahabodhi temple was undertaken by a Brahmana minister of Shaivite persuasion.⁶

The local RSS leader explains: The earliest and most authentic record is of course by Hiuen Tsang [= Xuan Zang] who visited Bodh Gaya in A.D. 637. He says that two Brahmin brothers prayed to Lord Maheshwara in the Himalayas to grant their wishes, upon which Maheshwara instructed them to carry out the meritorious task of erecting a large temple and excavate a large tank and devote all kinds of religious offerings near the most sanctified Bodhi tree for attaining the fruit of a Buddha. The elder Brahmin devotee accordingly built a large temple, etc.⁷ Not only did Hindus refrain

from demolishing the temple, but they actually built it. Now find us a Hindu temple built by Babar.

Studying the backgrounds of this quarrel throws a new light on the now-common allegation that Buddhism was persecuted by the Brahminical reaction under the imperial Gupta dynasty. In Bodh Gaya, the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang stayed in the Mahabodhi Sangharama, a splendid monastery with 1000 monks, which had been built, at the Sri Lankan king Meghavarmanas request, under the auspices of Samudragupta, the Gupta Emperor.⁸ Bodh Gaya has a large number of dated sculptures from the Gupta period, which was in fact one of the most fruitful periods in Buddhist art.⁹

It is therefore no surprise that Hindus have traditionally worshipped at Bodh Gaya, even during the heyday of Buddhism. Prof. Benimadhab Barua reports that concerning the right of the Hindus to worship the Buddha-image Dharmeshwara, [the Bodhi tree] in the Bodh-Gaya temple and its sacred area, we have noticed that as far back as the Kushana age it is enjoined in the Epic version of the earlier Eulogium that every pious Hindu visiting Gaya should make it a point to go also to Dharmaprashta or Bodh-Gaya and have a sacred touch of the Buddha image of the place. The later Eulogium in the Puranas enjoins in the same manner that every Hindu pilgrim to the Gaya region desiring to release the departed spirits of his ancestors must visit also Bodh Gaya to pay his respectful homage to the Buddha image Dharmeshvara as well as the [Bodhi tree].¹⁰

Even while arguing against the Shaiva Mahant of the Mahabodhi temple, who in the 1930s and 1940s, in league with the British (who feared Japanese interference), obstructed the implementation of a Hindu-Buddhist settlement, Prof. Benimadhab Barua admits: So far as our information goes, the Buddhists have never and nowhere prevented the Hindus from either visiting or conducting worship at their shrines. As a matter of fact, they have no case against the Hindu devotees coming to a Buddhist shrine for worship. Their shrines remain open to all for worship, without any distinction of caste and creed. The inscription of Keshava, engraved during the reign of Dharmapala, clearly proves that the Buddhists were liberal and tolerant enough even to allow a Hindu to instal a figure of his deities, Shiva

and Brahma, in their temple at Bodh-Gaya for the benefit of the resident Shaivite Brahmins.¹¹

It may therefore be noted that the Buddhist membership of the Bodh Gaya temple management board does not altogether share the anti-Hindu animus of the neo-Buddhists and their secularist manipulators. Thus, the 5th European Hindu Conference in Frankfurt featured a speech by Bhikkhu Jnana Jagat, member of the Bodh Gaya temple management committee and of the VHP. He presented the standard VHP viewpoint on Buddhism, viz. that from time immemorial the Vedic culture and Shramana (ascetic) culture have been growing and flourishing simultaneously in this land. Both being the integral part of the same Aryan culture or way of life have been enriching and sustaining each other through centuries.¹²

Whether the Brahmin control of the Mahabodhi area since the 16th century upto 1949 was similar in nature to the Muslim control of the Rama-Janmabhoomi site during the same period, can perhaps best be decided after considering this statement by a Muslim scholar, Dr. Abdul Qudoos Ansari: The iconoclastic fury of Islam must have [had] a terrible effect on the shrines of the Gaya region, and particularly on Buddhism, with the result that a time came when, there being no Buddhists to look after their own shrines and worship at Bodh Gaya, the Brahmins had to do their work even by going [outside] their jurisdiction.¹³ Though he gratuitously accuses the Brahmin management of the sin of greed, he does not accuse them of any destruction or forcible take-over, and this constitutes a radical difference with the Rama-Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid scenario.

Dr. Ansaris testimony against Islam rather than against Brahmanism as being the destroyer of Buddhism in India is doubly strong because otherwise he is a subscriber to the now-popular theory of an intense Buddhist-Brahminical antagonism. Thus, he interprets a depiction of the Vishnu Dashavatara series in which Vishnus ninth incarnation as the Buddha is missing as proof of this antagonism, along with a more explicit statement for hostility on the Buddhist side, viz. the images of some of their gods shown as humiliating the Hindu deities. He has no information on temple destructions, idol-breaking, massacres etc., only an artistic act of

disrespect. And that only on the Buddhist side: no Hindu art is mentioned as depicting Hindu gods humiliating the Buddha.

Showing disagreement or disrespect in words or images is no proof of effective fanaticism, meaning suppression of a cult or destruction of its symbols or institutions. On this type of evidence, Sita Ram Goel comments: It is nobodys case that Hindu sects (in which I include Buddhists and Jains) did not use strong language vis-à-vis each other. Every Brahmanical sect has used strong language about other Brahmanical sects. So have the Buddhists and the Jains, not only vis-à-vis Brahmanical sects but also vis-à-vis each other. The situation gets much worse when it comes to the sub-sects [in their polemic against one another], whether Buddhist or Brahmanical or Jain. But strong language alone, whether in words or portrayals, is no evidence in the present context, unless it is followed by overt acts of destruction or usurpation.¹⁴

The context which Dr. Ansari relates gives the impression that a more serious and less artistic fanaticism was troubling the Buddhists of Bodh Gaya, but not from the Brahminical establishment: the then king Buddhasena (the last but one independent ruler in the area) had fled into the forest on the outskirts of Gaya on the approach of the Turkish raiders but returned soon after withdrawal. The famous Tibetan monk Dharmaswami (1234-36 in that area) had to flee away for seventeen days, owing to the [apprehension of] the attack of the Turks, and king Buddhasena, not able to provide protection, also escaped into the forest for fear of the Turks.¹⁵

It was the temples good fortune that the living Buddhist presence there had practically disappeared by the time the area passed into Muslim hands. Already in Dharmaswamis time, decades before the actual Muslim take-over of that very area, all students and pilgrims and lay Buddhists had stopped coming to the area: According to Dharmaswami, the Bodh Gaya establishment had been deserted by all except for [some] monks, on account of the repeated Turkish conquests.¹⁶ The popular support base and the training grounds for Buddhist monks were being destroyed in all of North India, and Bodh Gaya was dying as a Buddhist centre along with all those other establishments that were being physically eliminated by the Turks.

Not Hinduism but Islam destroyed Buddhism in India.

Footnotes:

¹*About Dr. Ambedkar, vide K. Elst: Dr. Ambedkar, a True Aryan, Voice of India. Delhi 1993.*

²*More details in K. Elst: Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid, Voice of India, Delhi 1990, p.102-104.*

³*The Christian-dominated Korean leadership has even been accused by neutral observers of military persecution of Buddhism, esp. the crackdown in October 1980, see Encyclopedia Britannica, Book of the Year 1988, entry Buddhism.*

⁴*Letter to Dalit Voice, published on 1-2-1993. We need not fuss over inflated attendance figures.*

⁵*Monks launch fresh stir at Bodh Gaya, Indian Express, 2-11-1995.*

⁶*Dipak K. Barua: Buddha Gaya, Bodh Gaya 1981, p.41, with reference to Xuan Zang, who saw the temple in 637 A.D., shortly after it was built, and who explicitly gave the credit to a Brahmin worshipper of Shiva Maheshwara.*

⁷*Bodh Gaya: Facts and Fiction, Daya Prakash speaking to Organiser, 16-7-1995.*

⁸*Surendranath Sen: India through Chinese Eyes, Bagchi & Co., Calcutta 1979 (1956), p. 166.*

⁹*Reported in Abdul Quddoos Ansari: Archaeological Remains of Bodhgaya, Ramanand Vidyabhavan, Delhi 1990, p.15.*

¹⁰*B. Barua: Bodh-Gaya from Buddhist Point of View and Bodh-Gaya from Hindu Point of view, app.2 in D.K. Barua: Buddha Gaya, p.267. The article is a reprint of an older publication, of which no date is*

given, but which seems to be related to his book *Gaya and Buddha-Gaya*, 1934. Bodhi = awakening; the Bodhi tree is the one under which Siddhartha Gautama achieved Bodhi and became the Buddha, the Awakened One.

[11](#) B. Barua in D.K. Barua: *Buddha Gaya*, p. 268-269. Mahant= managing temple priest.

[12](#) Bhikkhu Jnana Jagat: *Contribution of Buddhism to Indian Culture, 5th European Hindu Conference (conference souvenir volume)*, p. 57.

[13](#) A.Q. Ansari: *Archaeological Remains*, p.119.

[14](#) S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.2 (2nd edition), p.413.

[15](#) A.Q. Ansari: *Archaeological Remains*, p.26.

[16](#) A.Q. Ansari: *Archaeological Remains*, p.26.

4. Harsha of Kashmir, a Hindu Iconoclast?

4.1. Claims of Hindu iconoclasm

Whenever the history of the many thousands of temple destructions by Muslims is discussed, the secularists invariably come up with the claim that Hindus have done much the same thing to Buddhists, Jains and Animists. In particular, the disappearance of Buddhism from India is frequently explained as the result of Brahminical onslaught. Though extremely widespread by now, this allegation is entirely untrue.

As for tribal animists, numerous tribes have been gradually sanskritized, acculturated into the Hindu mainstream, and this never required any break with their worship of local Goddesses or sacred trees. The latter have easily found a place in Hinduism, if need be in what Indologists call the little traditions flourishing in the penumbra of the great tradition. The only break sometimes required was in actual customs, most notably the abjuring of cow-slaughter; but on the whole, there is an unmistakable continuity between Hinduism and the various animisms of Indias tribes. Hinduism itself is, after all, animism transformed by metaphysics, as aptly written in the 1901 census reports introduction discussing the infeasibility of separating Hinduism from animism.

As for conflict with the Jain and Buddhist sects, even what little evidence is cited turns out to prove a rather different phenomenon on closer inspection. The very few conflicts attested were generally started by the sectarian Buddhists or Jains. This way, a few possible cases of Shaiva (esp. Virashaiva) intolerance against Jains in South India turn out to be cases of retaliation for Jain acts of intolerance, if the event was at all historical to begin with. if there was a brief episode of mutual Shaiva-Jaina persecution, it was at any rate not based on the religious injunctions of either system, and therefore remained an ephemeral and atypical event.

The oft-repeated allegation that Pushyamitra Sunga offered a reward for the heads of Buddhist monks is a miraculous fable related exclusively in a hostile source and contradicted by the finding of art historians that Pushyamitra was a generous patron of Buddhist institutions. Of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, by contrast, it is known from Buddhist sources that he ordered the killing of Jain monks. Moreover, the *Vinaya Pitaka* relates another incident in which he ordered the killing of five hundred Buddhist monks. He was angry because they rejected his interference in an internal dispute in the Buddhist order. This event incidentally illustrates how even the actual killing of Buddhists need not be motivated by an anti-Buddhist animus.

However, even Ashokas acts of intolerance remained exceptional events because they lacked scriptural justification. Likewise, the alleged oppression of Brahmins by the Buddhist Kushanas can never have been more than exceptional because it had no solid scriptural basis; unlike Islamic iconoclasm and religious persecution, which is firmly rooted in the normative example of Prophet Mohammed. Judging from the evidence shown so far, I maintain that Hindu persecutions of Buddhists have been approximately non-existent. Buddhism was alive and flourishing in dozens of institutions including international universities like Nalanda when Mohammed Ghori and his lieutenants appeared on the scene to destroy them all in the last decade of the 12th century.

To sum up: 1) Buddhism was flourishing all over the country when the Islamic invaders arrived on the scene; 2) both Buddhism and Jainism were being patronised by kings whom the Marxists label as Hindus; 3) Buddhist monks fled to Nepal and Tibet only after thousands of them were massacred and their monasteries destroyed by the Islamic marauders; 4) Buddhism continued to flourish all over Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka till attacked by the armies of Islam in the fourteenth century; 5) Buddhism did not survive the Islamic assault because, unlike Brahmanism and Jainism, it was centred round monasteries and monks.¹

4.2. An eminent historian on the warpath

The matter should have been put to rest there, but some Marxist polemicists just cannot let go of what they had hoped would be a trump

card in their struggle to death against Hinduism. Next to the Pushyamitra fable, the most popular evidence for Hindu persecutions of Buddhism is a passage in Kalhanas history of Kashmir where king Harsha is accused of looting and desecrating temples.² This example is given by JNU emeritus professor of ancient history, Romila Thapar, in a book and again in a letter written in reply to a query on Arun Shouries revelations on the financial malversations and scholarly manipulations by a group of secularist historians including herself.³ The letter found its way to internet discussion forums, and I reproduce the relevant part here:

As regards the distortions of history, Shourie does not have the faintest idea about the technical side of history-writing. His comments on [D.D.] Kosambi, [D.N.] Jha and others are laughable - as indeed Indian historians are treating him as a joke. Perhaps you should read the articles by H. Mukhia in the *Indian Express* and S. Subramaniam in *India Today*. Much of what Shourie writes can only be called garbage since he is quite unaware that history is now a professional discipline and an untrained person like himself, or like the others he quotes, such as S.R. Goel, do not understand how to use historical sources. He writes that I have no evidence to say that Buddhists were persecuted by the Hindus. Shourie of course does not know Sanskrit nor presumably does S.R. Goel, otherwise they would look up my footnotes and see that I am quoting from the texts of Banabhattas *Harshacharita* of the seventh century A.D. and Kalhanas *Rajatarangini* of the twelfth century A.D. Both texts refer to such persecutions.⁴

Hopefully she is aware that the Harsha of her first source (Harsha of Kanauj) is not the same person as the one of her second source, the villain Harsha of Kashmir. Let us at any rate take a closer look at this paragraph by the eminent historian.

Most space of her para and indeed her whole letter is devoted to attacks *ad hominem*, much of it against Mr. Sita Ram Goel. In his book *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*, vol.1 (Voice of India, Delhi 1990), Goel has listed nearly two thousand mosques standing on the debris of demolished Hindu temples. That is to say, nearly two thousand specific assertions which satisfy Karl Poppers criterion of scientific theories, viz. that they should be *falsifiable*: it must be clear which test, if not met, would

decide on the wrongness of the assertion. In practice, every secularist historian can go and unearth the story of each or any of the mosques enumerated and prove that it was unrelated to any temple demolition. But until today, not one member of the well-funded brigade of secularist historians has taken the scholarly approach and investigated any of Goel's documented assertions. The general policy is to deny his existence by keeping him unmentioned; most publications on the Ayodhya affair have not even included his book in their bibliographies even though it holds the key to the whole controversy.

But sometimes, the secularists cannot control their anger at Goel for having exposed and refuted their propaganda, and then they do some shouting at him, as done in this case by Romila Thapar. It is not true that Sita Ram Goel is an untrained person, as she alleges. He has an MA in History from Delhi University (1944). And he has actually practised history, writing both original and secondary studies on Communism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

Goel also happens to be fluent in Sanskrit, quite unlike Romila Thapar, whose knowledge of Sanskrit has subtly been tested by questioners during lectures and found wanting. Having gone through Urdu-medium schooling and having lived in Calcutta for many years, Mr. Goel is fluent in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, English and Sanskrit, and also reads Persian (a course of Persian being a traditional part of Urdu-medium education). This is the perfect linguistic equipment for a student of Indian history, and in that respect at least, Goel can argue circles around the ill-equipped Professor. In *Hindu Temples*, vol. 2, a book of which Goel sent Prof. Thapar a copy, he has discussed the very testimonies she is invoking as proof (along with her similarly haughty and status-oriented reply and his own comment on it)⁵ - yet here she maintains that he has not bothered to check her sources.

Note, at any rate, Romila Thapar's total reliance on arguments of authority and status. No less than seven times does she denounce Shourie's alleged incompetence: Shourie has not the faintest idea, is unaware, untrained, and does not know, and what he does is laughable, a joke, garbage. But what exactly is wrong in his writing, we are not allowed to know. If history is now a professional discipline, one couldnt deduce it

from this Prof. Thapars letter, for its line of argument is part snobbery and part medieval invocation of formal authority, and either way quite bereft of the scientific approach.

Reliance on authority and especially on academic titles is quite common in academic circles, yet it is hardly proof of a scholarly mentality. Commoners often attach great importance to titles (e.g., before I obtained my doctorate, I was often embarrassed by lecture organizers introducing me as Dr. or even Prof. Elst, because they could not imagine that someone could be competent without such a title). But scholars actively involved in research ought to, know from experience that many publications by title-carrying people are useless, while conversely, a good deal of important research is the fruit of the labour of so-called amateurs, or of established scholars accredited only in a different field of expertise. Incidentally, Prof. Thapars pronouncements on medieval history are also examples of such transgression of specialism boundaries, as her field really is ancient rather than medieval history.

At any rate, knowledge of Sanskrit is not the issue, for the *Rājatarangini* is available in English translation, as Romila Thapar certainly knows: *Rajatarangini. The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir*, translated from Sanskrit by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, with a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, 1935. With my limited knowledge of Sanskrit, I have laboriously checked the crucial sentences against the Sanskrit text.⁶ I could not find fault with the translation, and even if there were imperfections in terms of grammar, style or vocabulary, we can be sure that there are no distortions meant to please the Hindu nationalists, for the translator was an outspoken Nehruvian. If I am not mistaken, he was the husband of Nehrus sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, whose defects did not include a weakness for Hindutva.

4.3. An eminent brawl

Let us now check Prof. Thapars references, starting with the review article on Shouries book by S. Subramaniam: History sheeter. Bullheaded Shourie makes the left-right debate a brawl. This article itself is quite a brawl: Shourie has nothing to say beyond repeating the Islamophobic tirade of his henchman, the monomaniacal Sita Ram Goel who is referred to repeatedly in the text as indefatigable and even intrepid. Goels stock in

trade has been to reproduce ad nauseam the same extracts from those colonial pillars Elliott and Dowson and that happy neo-colonialist Sir Jadunath Sarkar.⁷

It is, of course, quite untrue that Shouries book is but a rehashing of earlier work by Goel. As can be verified in the index of Shouries book, Goels findings are discussed in it on p.99-100, p. 107-108, and p.253-254; that leaves well over two hundred pages where Shourie does have something to say beyond repeating the tirade of his henchman. Goel may be many things, but certainly not monomaniacal. He has written a handful of novels plus essays and studies on Communism, Greek philosophy, several aspects of Christian doctrine and history, Secularism, Islam, and of course Hinduism.

Goels writings on Islam are much richer than a mere catalogue of atrocities, and even the catalogue of atrocities is drawn from many more sources than just Elliott and Dowson. The latters alleged colonialist motives do not nullify the accuracy of their translation of Muslim testimonies; it is not without reason that their 8-volume study was called *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*. I am also not aware that Goel has repeated certain quotations *ad nauseam*; to my knowledge, most Elliott & Dowson and Jadunath Sarkar quotations appear only once in his collected works. Finally, Goels position is not more Islamophobic than the average book on World War 2 is Naziphobic; if certain details about the doctrines studied are repulsive, that may be due to the facts more than to the prejudice of the writer.

So, practically every word in Subramaniam's evaluation is malicious and untrue. No wonder, then, that he concludes his evaluation of Shouries latest book as follows: But serious thought of any variety has been replaced by spleen, hysteria and abuse. That, of course, is rather the case with Shouries critics, including Subramaniam himself who keeps the readers in the dark about Shouries arguments and withholds from us his own rebuttals. If Romila Thapar refers to his review, it can only be for its treating Shourie like a joke, but by no means for its demonstrating how history has now become a scientific discipline. All it demonstrates is the bullying rhetoric so common in the debate between the scientific and the secularist schools of

Indian history. As a reader commented in the next issue: The review of Arun Shouries *Eminent Historians* ironically hardly mentioned what the book was about. It read more like a biographical sketch of the author with a string of abuses thrown in.⁸

As for NU professor Harbans Mukhia, in a guest column in *Indian Express*, he surveys the influence of Marxism in Indian historiography, highlighting the pioneering work of D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma and Irfan Habib in the 1950s and 60s.⁹ He argues that this Marxist wave began without state patronage; this in an apparent attempt to refute Shourie's account of the role of state patronage and of the resulting corruption in the power position Marxist historians have come to enjoy. This is of course a straw man: Shourie never denied that Kosambi meant what he wrote rather than being an opportunist eager to please Marxist patrons.

The dominance of Marxist scholarship started with independent and sincere (though by no means impeccable) scholars like Kosambi. In a second phase, the swelling ranks of committed Marxist academics got a hold on the academic and cultural power positions. In the next phase, being a Marxist was so profitable that many opportunists whose commitment was much shallower also joined the ranks, hastening the inevitable process of corruption. I may add that in the present phase, Marxists are furiously defending their power position while their history-rewriting is being exposed and demolished; and in the final phase, they will lose their grip and disappear.

Anyway, the only real argument which Mukhia develops, is this: To be fair, such few professionals as the BJP has in its camp have seldom levelled these charges at least in public. They leave this task to the likes of Sita Ram Goel who, one learns, does full time business for profit and part time history for pleasure, and Arun Shourie who, too, one learns, does journalism for a living, specializing in the investigation of non-BJP persons scandals.

It is not clear where Mukhia has done his learning, but his information on Goel is incorrect. Goel was a brilliant student of History at Delhi University where he earned his MA. in some parts of the period 1949-63 he

was indeed a part-time historian, working for a living as well as doing nonprofit research on the contemporary history of Communism. He did full-time business for profit between 1963, when he lost his job after publishing a book critical of Jawaharlal Nehru, and 1982, when he handed his business over to younger relatives. Ever since, he has been a full-time historian, and some of his publications are simply the best in their field, standing unchallenged by the historians of Mukhias school, who have never gotten farther than the kind of invective *ad hominem* which we find in the abovementioned texts by Romila Thapar, S. Subramaniam and Mukhia himself.

As for Shourie, Mukhia is hardly revealing a secret with his information that Shourie does journalism for a living. The greatest investigative journalist in India by far, he has indeed unearthed some dirty secrets of Congressite, casteist and Communist politicians. His revelations about the corrupt financial dealings between the Marxist historians and the government-sponsored academic institutions are in that same category: fearless and factual investigative journalism. Shourie has a Ph.D. degree in Economics from Syracuse University in U.S.A., which should attest to a capacity for scholarship, even if not strictly in the historical field. When he criticizes the gross distortions of history by Mukhias school, one could say formally that he transgresses the boundaries of his specialism, but such formalistic exclusives only hide the absence of a substantive refutation.

After all, it is only the contents of an authors writings on history which must stamp him as a real c.q. a would-be historian. For instance, Shouries historical research on Dr. Ambedkar has suddenly brought back to earth the deified Ambedkar of the early 1990s.¹⁰ None of the politicians or intellectuals who had extolled Ambedkar beyond all proportion till the day before have challenged the research findings presented by Shourie. Likewise, Shouries allegations of both financial malfeasance and scholarly manipulation (amounting to wilful distortion of Indian history) against Harbans Mukhias circle stand unshaken.

4.4. Kalhanas first-hand testimony

Now, let us look into the historical references cited by Romila Thapar. To check Banabhattas *Harshacharita*, concerning Harsha of Kanauj (r.606-

647), no knowledge of Sanskrit is needed, for the book has long been extant in English and Hindi translations.¹¹ I have not found the allegations cited by Romila Thapar, nor any other description of a case of religious persecution (though Bana mentions in passing that the Buddhist monks did not love the Brahmins, a legitimate exercise of their freedom of opinion as guaranteed under all Hindu regimes). On the contrary, the text testifies to Hindu society's achievement of an impressive communal harmony, as even the otherwise Hindu-baiting translator E.B.Cowell is forced to admit.

Of course, being myopic and easily distracted when reading difficult texts, I may have overlooked the tell-tale passage. Perhaps the eminent historian could provide the exact location and quotation herself? Meanwhile, I have been able to consult both the Sanskrit original and the English translation of Kalhana's *Rājataranīgini*, and that source provides a clinching testimony.

Harsha or Harshadeva of Kashmir (r. 1089-1111) has been called the Nero of Kashmir, and this because of his cruelty.¹² He is described by Kalhana as having looted and desecrated most of the Hindu and Buddhist temples in Kashmir, partly through an office which he had created specially for this purpose. The general data on 11th-century Kashmir already militate against treating him as a typical Hindu king who did on purely Hindu grounds what Muslim kings also did, viz. to destroy the places of worship of rival religions. For, Kashmir had already been occupied by Masud Ghaznavi, son of Mahmud, in 1034, and Turkish troops were a permanent presence as mercenaries to the king.

Harsha was a fellow-traveller: not yet a full convert to Islam (he still ate pork), but quite adapted to the Islamic ways, for he ever fostered with money the Turks, who were his centurions.¹³ There was nothing Hindu about his iconoclasm, which targeted Hindu temples, as if a Muslim king were to demolish mosques rather than temples. All temples in his kingdom except four (two of them Buddhist)¹⁴ were damaged. This behaviour was so un-Hindu and so characteristically Islamic that Kalhana reports: In the village, the town or in Srinagara there was not one temple which was not despoiled by the Turk king Harsha.¹⁵

So there you have it: the Turk king Harsha. Far from representing Hindu tradition of iconoclasm which no one has ever known or discovered, Harsha of Kashmir was a somewhat peculiar (viz. fellow-traveller) representative of the *Islamic* tradition of iconoclasm. Like Mahmud Ghaznavi and Aurangzeb, he despoiled and looted Hindu shrines, not non-Hindu ones. Influenced by the Muslims in his employ, he behaved like a Muslim. Even Ranjit Sitaram Pandit is forced to admit the impact of Islam, though in veiled language: The Turks referred to here, it is clear, are those who in accordance with the *religious ideas of the Arabs* had renounced pork.¹⁶

All this is said explicitly in the text which Romila Thapar cites as proving the existence of Hindu iconoclasm. If she herself has read it at all, she must be knowing that it doesn't support the claim she is making. Clearly she has been bluffing, making false claims about Kalhanas testimony in the hope that her readers would be too inert to check the source. Worst of all, she has made these false claims about Kalhanas testimony even while denouncing others for not having checked with Kalhana.

4.5. Romila Thapar on Mahmud Ghaznavi

It is not the first and only time that Romila Thapar has somehow missed the decisive information given in primary sources. In her much-publicized paper on Somnath and Mahmud Ghaznavi, she questioned the veracity of Mahmuds reputation as an idol-breaker, claiming that all the references to Mahmuds destruction of the Somnath temple (1026) are non-contemporary as well as distorted by ulterior motives.¹⁷

That was the Ayodhya debate all over again: when evidence was offered of pre-British references to the destruction of a Rama temple on the Babri Masjid site, the pro-Babri Masjid Action Committee historians replied that the evidence was not contemporary enough, but without explaining why so many secondary sources come up with the temple demolition story. Likewise here: if there was so much myth-making around Ghaznavis Somnath campaign, even making him the norm of iconoclasm against which the Islamic zeal of every Delhi sultan was measured, what momentous event (other than that he really destroyed the Somnath temple) triggered all this myth-making?

Anyway, in this case the claim that there is no contemporary evidence for Mahmuds explicitly religious act of destroying the Somnath idol and temple, is simply false. Though Romila Thapar does mention Ghaznavis employee Alberuni, she conceals that Alberuni, who had widely travelled in India and was as contemporary to Ghaznavi as can be, has explicitly confirmed Ghaznavis general policy of Islamic iconoclasm and specifically his destruction of the Somnath temple. It is in fact Alberuni who gives the oft-quoted detail that the main idol was broken to pieces, with one piece being thrown into the hippodrome of a mosque in Ghazni and another being built into the steps at the entrance of the mosque, so that worshippers could wipe their feet on it.¹⁸ Mahmuds effort to desecrate the idol by all means shows that his iconoclasm was not just a matter of stealing the temple gold, but was a studied act of religious desecration.

He thereby smashed to pieces yet another pet theory of the Romila Thapar school, viz. that the Islamic iconoclasts motive was economic rather than religious. I think it is demeaning to devout Muslim rulers when their religious zeal is explained away as a mere matter of greed. Also, in Islam there is no contradiction between greed and religious zeal, as the division of the spoils is a rightful conclusion to a jihad, sanctioned by Prophet Mohammeds own example. At any rate, it is precisely the primary sources which leave no stone standing of the edifice of Nehruvian history-rewriting.

It may be remarked here in passing that Prof. Thapar also demonstrates her very weak grip on religious issues with her little excursus on the occasional Muslim interpretation (rendered more plausible by the imprecision of the Arabic script in transcribing Indian words) of *Somanâtha* as *Somanât*, and hence of the temple as a place where the Arabian Goddess Manât was worshipped. In spite of her own position, she actually hits the nail on the head in her rendering of what she describes as Turco-Persian myth-making: The link with Manat added to the acclaim for Mahmud. Not only was he the prize iconoclast in breaking Hindu idols, but in destroying Manat he had carried out what were said to be the very orders of the Prophet.

Well, exactly. Far from being some semi-literates private myth-making, this is a fanciful elaboration on what is otherwise a pure instance of Islamic

theology, valid for all Muslims who take their religion seriously. Regardless of whether Manat was worshipped in the Somnath temple (or earlier in a Somnath-devoted open-air sacred space), the Islamic struggle against polytheistic, idolatrous Hinduism was but a continuation of Prophet Mohammed's own struggle against and destruction of the native polytheistic, idolatrous religion of Arabia. The continuity between these two Pagan traditions had been acknowledged by their own votaries: pre-Islamic Arab traders in Gujarat paid their respects to Shiva Somnath, as Hindu traders in Bahrain or Yemen did to the Gods and Goddesses of Arabia in the Kaaba. In Islam, it was therefore a pious act to treat all instances of Hindu idolatry the way Prophet Mohammed had treated the idols in the Kaaba upon conquering Mecca: destroy them. In spite of herself, Prof. Thapar has pointed out the purely Islamic basis for Mahmuds behaviour.

4.6. A small apology

It gives me no enjoyment to demolish the false credibility of a highly-placed historian like Prof. Romila Thapar. indeed, those who have read earlier works of mine, esp. *Negationism in India* (1992), will have noticed that my language even in polemic has softened and become more focused on viewpoints rather than groups of people such the Muslims or the Marxist historians. I truly regret it if the above chapter has hurt the feelings of the august professor, as I guess it must have. The only mitigating circumstances, which still cannot undo my sincere regret, are the following two.

Firstly, it must have become quite apparent in passing that she herself has done her share of levelling accusations against people. I dare add that she has often made allegations very lightly, either without bothering to check the sources or deliberately not taking the sources information into account. in my research on various topics, I have run into allegations by Prof. Thapar which flew in the face of both the documentation available to historians and the general knowledge available to the public.

Thus, when writing on the Aryan invasion debate, I encountered a paper by her on the same topic in which she alleged that in the Arya Samaj, the untouchables were excluded¹⁹ Every Indian, and a fortiori a historian

originating in the Arya Samajs Panjabi heartland. must be aware that the Arya Samaj pioneered the struggle against untouchability, and that its office-bearers voluntarily risked exclusion from their own castes by inviting untouchables to participate in the Samajs activities on equal terms. It is hard to find a way of explaining the eminent historians slur on the Arya Samaj as a mere mistake.

Secondly, in my criticism of other authors, I take their social position into account. I will avoid being harsh on a poor and marginal author who is made to suffer for his opinions by being thwarted in his career. On the other hand, people who enjoy fame, profitable appointments and royalties from prestigious publishers, should have a thicker skin. Prof. Thapar is the most-applauded Nehruvian historian alive at the time of my writing, so my little bit of criticism is easily outweighed by all the more pleasant aspects of her position.

In early 2001, she even received an honorary doctorate at the Sorbonne, Frances premier university. Most unusually, the awarding committee made it a point to lambast, in its official announcement, French journalist François Gautier for having exposed some of the scholarly frauds committed by the eminent historian. Rather than check Gautiers allegations, which implied that rewarding Romila Thapar would taint the fair name of the Sorbonne, the French professors acted as her good political buddies and awarded her the honour anyway. Fair enough: at her age, she should not be denied some fine laurels to rest on.

Footnotes:

¹*Hindu Temples, vol.2 (2nd ed.), p.421.*

²*Rajatarangini, Taranga 7: 1089 ff.*

³*Romila Thapar et al.: Communalism in the Waiting of Indian History, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi 1987 (1969), p.15-16, and repeated in her letter to Mr. Manish Tayal (UK), 7-2-1999, concerning Arun Shourie: Eminent Historians, ASA, Delhi 1998.*

⁴Manish Tayal: Romila Thapars reply to Eminent Historians, shaktil@hinduworld.com, 16-2-1999.

⁵Sita Ram Goel: *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them*, vol. 2 (second edition), p.408-422.

⁶M.A. Stein, ed.: *Kalhanas Rajatarangini or Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir* (1892), republished by Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi 1960.

⁷S. Subramaniam: *History sheeter. Bullheaded Shourie makes the left-right debate a brawl*, India Today, 7-12-1998.

⁸K.R. Panda, *Delhi*, in India Today, 21-12-1998.

⁹Harbans Mukhia: *Historical wrongs. The rise of the part-time historian*, Indian Express, 27-11-1998.

¹⁰Arun Shourie: *Worshipping False Gods. Ambedkar and the Facts which Have Been Erased*, ASA, Delhi 1997.

¹¹E.B. Cowell and F.W. Thomas: *Harsa Carita of Bana*, Royal Asiatic Society Oriental Translation Fund, New Series no. VIII, London 1929 (1897); and Jagannatha Pathak: *Harsha-Charita*, Chaukhamba Vidyabhavan, Varanasi 1964. Also vide V.S. Agrawala: *The Deeds of Harsha*, Prithivi Prakashan, Varanasi 1969, and Bijnath Sharma: *Harsha and His Times*, Sushma Prakasha, Varanasi 1970.

¹²S.B. Bhattacherje: *Encyclopaedia of Indian Events and Dates*, Sterling Publ., Delhi 1995, p.A-20.

¹³Rajatarangini 7:1149; translation by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, Sahitya Akademi reprint, Delhi 1990, p.357; other relevant passages at p.352.

¹⁴Enumerated in Rajatarangini 7:1096-1098; translation by R.S. Pandit.

[15](#) *Raiatarangini* 7:1095; translation by R.S. Pandit, p.352.

[16](#) *Rajatarangini*, p.357n.; translation by R.S. Pandit; emphasis added.

[17](#) Romila Thapar: *Somanatha and Mahmud*, *Frontline*, 23-4-1999. *The Communist fortnightly refused to publish a rebuttal by a historian of equal rank, Prof. K.S. Lal; it was published as Somnath and Mahmud in Organiser*, 4-7-1999.

[18](#) Edward Sechau, tra.: *Alberunis India*, London 1910, vol.2, p.103.

[19](#) Romila Thapar: *The theory of the Aryan race and India: history and politics*, *Social Scientist*, Delhi, January-March 1996, p.8, discussed in K. Elst: *Update on the Aryan Invasion Debate*, Aditya Prakashan, Delhi 1999, p.5.

5. Vandalism Sanctified by Scripture

(After Hindu activists demolished a mosque in a small town in Rajasthan, the on-line magazine OutlookIndia published a comment with an entirely predictable message by the well-known secularist Yoginder Sikand. At the editors invitation, I wrote the following rebuttal, published on 31 August 2001.)

In his article Sanctified Vandalism As A Political Tool (www.OutLookIndia.com, Aug. 23, 2001), Yoginder Sikand tries to explain away Muslim iconoclasm as marginal and uncharacteristic, all while accusing the Hindus and others of just such iconoclasm. In both endeavours, he predictably relies on Richard Eatons book *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (OUP Delhi 2000).

According to Sikand, Eaton clearly shows that cases of destruction of places of worship were not restricted to Muslim rulers alone. He recounts numerous instances of Hindu kings having torn down Hindu temples, in addition to Jaina and Buddhist shrines. He says that these must be seen as, above all, powerful politically symbolic acts. Follows a list of such allegations against historical Hindu kings.

As it takes at least a page to evaluate or refute an allegation uttered in a single sentence, I cannot discuss those allegations here, so I will accept for the sake of argument that there have indeed been instances of Hindu kings looting Hindu idols and destroying Hindu temples for political purposes. However, it is obvious that these do not create Sikands desired impression of symmetry between Hindu and Muslim iconoclasm. Such symmetry would require that like Hindu kings, whose goal was political rather than religious, Muslim kings also destroyed places of worship of their own religion. Eaton and Sikand would succeed in blurring the contrast between Hindu and Muslim attitudes to places of worship if they could present a sizable list of *mosques* destroyed by Muslim conquerors.

In a further attempt to blame even Islamic iconoclasm on the alleged Hindu example, Sikand quotes Eaton again: It is clear that temples had been the natural sites for the contestation of kingly authority well before the coming of Muslim Turks to India. Not surprisingly, Turkish invaders, when attempting to plant their own rule in early medieval India, followed and continued established patterns. How strange then that the Muslim records never invoke the Hindu example: invariably they cite Islamic scripture and precedent as justification for desecrating Pagan temples. As we shall see, the justification was provided outside of the Hindu sphere of influence in 7th-century Arabia.

But at least Sikand admits the fact of Islamic iconoclasm: It is true that, as the historical records show, some Muslim kings did indeed destroy Hindu temples. This even Muslims themselves would hardly dispute. However, Sikand claims that unnamed Hindutva sources have grossly exaggerated the record of Islamic temple destruction: Richard Eaton points out that of the sixty thousand-odd cases of temple destruction by Muslim rulers cited by contemporary Hindutva sources one may identify only eighty instances whose historicity appears to be reasonably certain.

In his seminal book *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them*, independent Hindu historian Sita Ram Goel has listed two thousand cases where a mosque was built in forcible replacement of a Hindu temple. Not one of these verifiable items has been proven false, not by Sikand nor by Eaton or other eminent historians. It is also instructive to see for oneself what Eatons purported eighty cases are, on pp. 128-132 of his book. These turn out not to concern individual places of worship, but campaigns of destruction affecting whole cities with numerous temples at once. Among the items on Eatons list, we find Delhi under Mohammed Ghoris onslaught, 1193, or Benares under the Ghurid conquest, 1194, and again under Aurangzebs temple-destruction campaign, 1669. On each of these three occasions, literally hundreds of temples were sacked. In the case of Delhi, we all know how the single Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque replaced 27 temples, incorporating their rubble. At this rate, Eatons eighty instances easily match Goels two thousand, perhaps even the unnamed Hindutva authors sixty thousand.

Sikand continues with the oft-used argument: Caution must be exercised in accepting the narratives provided by medieval writers about the exploits of kings, including their feats of temple destruction. Most historians were employees of the royal courts, and they tended to exaggerate the exploits of the kings in order to present them as great champions of Islam, an image that hardly fits the facts that we know about them. So, as Sikand admits in so many words, the Muslim chroniclers were collectively convinced that they could enhance the standing of their patrons as champions of Islam by attributing to them feats of temple destruction. Perhaps some of them were liars, as Sikand alleges, and merely attributed these feats of temple destruction to kings who had no such merit. But fact is: all of them, liars as well as truth-tellers, acted on the collectively accepted premiss that a good Muslim ruler is one who extirpates idolatry including its material places and objects of worship. They all believed that Islam justifies and requires the destruction of idol temples. And rest assured that, like the Taliban, they had received a far more thorough training in Islamic theology than Eaton or Sikand.

In a further attempt to minimize Muslim iconoclasm, Sikand claims: As in the case of Hindu rulers attacks on temples, Eaton says that almost all instances of Muslim rulers destroying Hindu shrines were recorded in the wake of their capture of enemy territory. Once these territories were fully integrated into their dominions, few temples were targeted. This itself clearly shows that these acts were motivated, above all, by political concerns and not by a religious impulse to extirpate idolatry.

In fact, there were plenty of cases of temple destruction unrelated to conquest, the best-known being Aurangzeb's razing of thousands of temples which his predecessors had allowed to come up. But I concede that stable Muslim kingdoms often allowed less prominent temples to function, most openly the Moghul empire from Akbar to Shah Jahan. This was precisely because they could only achieve stability by making a compromise with the majority population.

Islamic clerics could preach all they wanted about Islamic purity and the extirpation of idolatry, but rulers had to face battlefield realities (apart from being constrained by the never-ending faction fights within the Muslim

elite) and were forced to understand that they could not afford to provoke Hindus too far.

Akbars genius consisted in enlisting enough Hindu support or acquiescence to maintain a stable Muslim empire. After Aurangzeb broke Akbars compromise, the Moghul empire started falling apart under the pressure of the Maratha, Jat, Rajput and Sikh rebellions, thus proving the need for compromise a *contrario*.

In order to justify this compromise theologically, the *zimma* system originally designed for Christians and Jews (but excluding polytheists, a category comprising Hindus) was adapted to Indian conditions. This *zimma* or charter of toleration implied the imposition of a number of humiliating constraints on the non-Muslim subjects or *zimmi*-s, such as the toleration tax or jizya, but at least it allowed them to continue practising their religion in a discreet manner. The long-term design was to make the non-Islamic religions die out gradually by imposing permanent incentives for conversion to Islam, as witnessed by the slow plummeting of Christian demography in Egypt or Syria, from over 90% in the 7th century via some 50% in the 12th century to about 10% today. The system had the same impact in South Asia, yielding Muslim majorities in the areas longest or most intensely under Muslim control.

To varying extents, the *zimma* system could include permission to rebuild destroyed churches or temples. But even then, non-Muslim places of worship, though tolerated in principle, were not safe from Muslim destruction or expropriation. The Umayyad mosque in Damascus was once a cathedral, as was the Aya Sophia in Istanbul; the Mezquita of Cordova was built in replacement of a demolished church. Eaton and Sikand can propose their rosy scenario of Islamic iconoclasts emulating an imaginary Hindu iconoclasm only by keeping the non-Indian part of Muslim history out of view. It is entirely clear from the Muslim records that these temple-destroyers consciously repeated in India what earlier Muslim rulers had done in West Asia. The first of these rulers was the Prophet Mohammed himself. And this brings us to the crux of Sikands argument.

When the Taliban ordered the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, a secularist choir assured us that this had nothing to do with genuine Islam. To me it seems rather pretentious for secularists with their studied ignorance of religions to claim better knowledge of Islam than the Taliban, the students (of Islam), whose mental horizon consists of nothing but the detailed knowledge of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Nonetheless, Sikand repeats the exercise: Most importantly, a distinction must be made between Islamic commandments, on the one hand, and the acts of individual Muslims on the other. The Quran in no way sanctions the destruction of the places of worship of people of other faiths.

In deciding what is genuinely Islamic and what is not, it must be borne in mind that Islamic law is very largely based on the precedents set by the Prophet. Thus, it is lawful to kill Rushdie because the Prophet himself had had his critics executed or murdered. Likewise, the Taliban could justify their destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas with reference to Prophets own exemplary iconoclasm. The primary Islamic sources on the Prophets career (the *Hadis* and *Sira*) teach us that during his conquest of Arabia, he did destroy all functioning temples of the Arab Pagans, as well as a Christian church. When he was clearly winning the war, many tribes chose to avoid humiliation and martyrdom by crossing over to his side, but he would only allow them to join him on condition that they first destroy their idols. The truly crucial event was Prophets entry into the Kaaba, the central shrine of Arabias native religion, where he and his nephew Ali smashed the 360 idols with their own hands.

When prophet Mohammed appeared on the scene, Arabia was a multicultural country endowed with Pagan shrines, churches, synagogues and Zoroastrian fire-temples. When he died, all the non-Muslims had been converted, expelled or killed, and their places of worship laid waste or turned into mosques. As he had ordered before his death, only one religion remained in Arabia. If we were to believe Yoginder Sikand, Mohammeds iconoclasm was non-Islamic. In reality, Mohammeds conduct is the definitional standard of what it is to be a good Muslim.

It is true that the Quran has little to say on temple destruction, though it is very eloquent on Mohammeds programme of replacing all other religions

with his own (which obviously implies replacing temples with mosques). Yet, the Quran too provides justification for the smashing of the objects of non-Islamic worship. It claims that Abraham was the ancestor of the Arabs through Ismail, that his father had been an idol-maker, that he himself ordered the idols of his tribe destroyed (Q.37:93), and that he built the Kaaba as the first mosque, free of idols. It further describes how Abraham was rewarded for these virtuous acts. Obviously it cannot be un-Islamic to emulate a man described by the Quran as the first Muslim and favoured by Allah.

If Abraham existed at all, the only source about him is the Bible, which carries none of this information. It tells us that Ismail was the son of Abrahams Egyptian concubine Hagar, and that she took her son back to Egypt; Arabia is not in the picture at all. Nor do pre-Islamic Arab inscriptions mention Abraham, or Ismail or their purported aniconic worship in the Kaaba. The Quranic story about them is pure myth. Considering the secularist record on lambasting myths, I wonder why Sikand has not bothered to pour scorn on this Quranic myth yet.

All the same, Islamic apologists regularly justify the desecration of the Kaaba by Prophet Mohammed as a mere restoration of Abrahams monotheistic mosque which had been usurped by the polytheists. This happens to be exactly the justification given by Hindus for the demolition of the Babri Masjid, with this difference that the preexistence of a Hindu temple at the Babri Masjid site is a historical fact, while the preexistence of monotheistic and aniconic worship established by Abraham at the Kaaba is pure myth. At any rate, the Islamic account itself establishes that the model man Prophet Mohammed desecrated the Kaaba and forcibly turned it into a mosque, setting an example, particularly, for Mahmud Ghaznavi, Aurangzeb and the Taliban to emulate.

Let us conclude with a comment on Sikands conclusion: Hindus and Muslims alike, then, have been equally guilty of destroying places of worship, and, in this regard, as in any other, neither has a monopoly of virtue or vice. The destruction of the mosque in Rajasthan and building a temple in its place, like the tearing down of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva zealots or the vandalism of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban, shows

how sanctified vandalism and medieval notions of the politics of revenge are still alive and thriving in our part of the world.

Look how claims are smuggled into this conclusion which have not been established in Sikands argumentation. Even by Sikands own figures, Hindus and Muslims were far from equally guilty, as a handful of alleged cases of temple destruction by Hindus do not equal the eighty well-attested Islamic cases. Also, the notion of revenge, attributed here to Hindus and Muslims alike, does not apply to both. The Hindu kar sevakh in Ayodhya were arguably taking revenge for the destruction of the preexisting Rama Mandir, but the Islamic destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was not a case of revenge on anyone. The Taliban or Afghan Islam in general had not been hurt or threatened by Buddhists or by any other religion. Their iconoclasm was not a case of vengeance, but of unilateral and unprovoked aggression.

Nobody in this forum, or so I hope, claims a monopoly of virtue for the members of one religion, nor that of vice for those of another. The problem with religions is that they can make virtuous people commit vicious acts out of innocent piety, viz. by ordaining vicious behaviour as divinely sanctioned. In spite of Sikands attempt to whitewash Aurangzeb, evidence remains plentiful that this Moghul emperor committed acts of persecution and iconoclasm which would generally be considered vicious (they certainly would if committed by Hindutva activists, witness the torrent of abuse after the demolition of the Babri Masjid). Yet, by all accounts, Aurangzeb was a virtuous man, not given to self-indulgence, eager to fulfil his duties. Likewise, the Kashmiri militants who massacre Hindus are not people of evil character. They have left fairly cosy jobs or schools behind to put their lives on the line for their ideal, viz. bringing Kashmir under Islamic rule. It is the *contents* of their religion which makes them cross the line between their own goodness and the evil of their terrorist acts. The problem is not Muslims, the problem is Islam.

The founding texts as well as the history of Islam testify to the profound link between iconoclasm and the basic injunction of the Prophet, viz. that until ye believe in Allah alone, enmity and hate shall reign between us (Q.60:4), i.e. between Muslims and non-Muslims. I can understand that a

peace-loving Muslim who is comfortable with religious pluralism would have problems with this quotation, and generally with the unpleasant record of the founder and role model of his religion. Having wrestled with the Catholic faith in which I grew up, I know from experience that outgrowing ones religion can be a long and painful process. Regarding a Muslims reluctance to face these facts, I would therefore counsel compassion and patience.

But Yoginder Sikand doesnt have this excuse. For him as a secularist, facing and affirming the defects of religions should come naturally. One of the best-documented defects of any religion is the role of Islamic doctrine in the destruction of other peoples cultural treasures, rivalled only by Christianity in some of its phases, and surpassed only in the 20th century by Communism. A secularist should subject the record of Islam to criticism, not to a whitewash.

6. The Details About "Hindu Iconoclasm"

A remarkable aspect of the Ayodhya debate is the complete lack of active involvement by Western scholars. Their role has been limited to that of loudspeakers for the secularist-cum-Islamist party-line denying that any temple demolition had preceded the construction of the Babri Masjid. Even those who (like Hans Bakker and Peter Van der Veer) had earlier given their innocent support to the historical account, putting the Ayodhya case in the context of systematic Islamic iconoclasm, hurried to fall in line once the secularist campaign of history-rewriting started.

Given the widely acknowledged importance of the Ayodhya conflict, one would have expected at least some of the well-funded Western academics to embark on their own investigation of the issue rather than parroting the slogans emanating from Delhi's Jama Masjid and JNU. Their behaviour in the Ayodhya debate provides an interesting case study in the tendency of establishment institutions and settled academics to genuflect before ideological authorities overruling proper scholarly procedure in favour of the political fashion of the day. This is, I fear, equally true of the one Western academic who has substantively contributed to the debate, and whose contribution we will presently discuss.

6.1. Massive evidence of temple destruction

One Western author who has become very popular among India's history-rewriters is the American scholar Prof. Richard M. Eaton. Unlike his colleagues, he has done some original research pertinent to the issue of Islamic iconoclasm, though not of the Ayodhya case specifically. A selective reading of his work, focusing on his explanations but keeping most of his facts out of view, is made to serve the negationist position regarding temple destruction in the name of Islam.

Yet, the numerically most important body of data presented by him concurs neatly with the classic (now dubbed Hindutva) account. In his oft-quoted paper Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, he gives a list of eighty cases of Islamic temple destruction. Only eighty, is how the secularist history-rewriters render it, but Eaton makes no claim that his list is exhaustive. Moreover, eighty isn't always eighty.

Thus, in his list, we find mentioned as one instance: 1994: Benares, Ghurid army.¹ Did the Ghurid army work one instance of temple destruction? Eaton provides his source, and there we read that in Benares, the Ghurid royal army destroyed *nearly one thousand* temples, and raised mosques on their foundations.² This way, practically every one of the instances cited by Eaton must be read as actually ten, or a hundred, or as in this case even a thousand temples destroyed. Even Eatons non-exhaustive list, presented as part of the kind of responsible and constructive discussion that this controversial topic so badly needs³, yields the same *thousands* of temple destructions ascribed to the Islamic rulers in most relevant pre-1989 histories of Islam and in pro-Hindu publications.

That part is of course not highlighted in secularist papers exploiting Eatons work. Far more popular, however, is the spin which Eaton puts on his data: Islam cannot be blamed for the acts of Muslim idol-breakers, the blame lies elsewhere...

Apparently in good faith, but nonetheless in exactly the same manner as the worst Indian history falsifiers, Eaton discusses the record of Islam in India while keeping the entire history of Islam outside of India out of view. This history would show unambiguously that what happened in India was merely a continuation of Prophet Mohammed's own conduct in Arabia and his successors conduct during the conquest of West and Central Asia.

That the Arabian precedent is ignored is all the more remarkable when you consider that the stated immediate reason for Eatons paper was Sita Ram Goels endeavour to document a pattern of wholesale temple destruction by Muslims in the pre-British] period⁴ Goels elaborately argued thesis, tellingly left unmentioned here by Eaton, is precisely that Islamic iconoclasm in India follows a pattern set in the preceding centuries in West

Asia and accepted as normative in Islamic doctrine. Eatons glaring omission of this all-important precedent makes his alternative explanation of Islamic iconoclasm in India suspect beforehand.

6.2. Hindu iconoclasm?

Instead of seeking the motives of the Islamic idol-breakers in Islam, Eaton seeks it elsewhere: in Hinduism. He admits that during the Hindu reconquest of Muslim-occupied territories: Examples of mosque desecrations are strikingly few in number.⁵ Yet, in his opinion, Hindus had been practising their own very specific form of iconoclasm in earlier centuries. Though they themselves seem to have lost the habit by Shivajis time, it was this Hindu tradition which the Muslim invaders copied: The form of desecration that showed the greatest continuity with pre-Turkish practice was the seizure of the image of a defeated kings state-deity and its abduction to the victors capital as a trophy of war.⁶

One of the examples cited is this: When Firuz Tughluq invaded Orissa in 1359 and learned that the regions most important temple was that of Jagannath located inside the rajas fortress in Puri, he carried off the stone image of the god and installed it in Delhi in an ignominious position.⁷ And likewise, there are numerous instances of idols built into footpaths, lavatories and other profane positions. This is not disputed, but can any Hindu precedent be cited for it?

The work for which Indian secularists are most grateful to Eaton, is his digging up of a few cases of what superficially seems to be Hindu iconoclasm: For, while it is true that contemporary Persian sources routinely condemn idolatry (*but-parastī*) on religious grounds, it is also true that attacks on images patronized by enemy kings had been, from about the sixth century A.D. on, thoroughly integrated into Indian political behavior.⁸ Because a state deitys idol was deemed to resonate with the states fortunes (so that its accidental breaking apart was deemed an evil omen for the state itself), the generalization of idol worship in temples in the first millennium A.D. oddly implied that early medieval history abounds in instances of temple desecration that occurred amidst inter-dynastic conflicts.⁹

If the eighty (meaning thousands of) cases of Islamic iconoclasm are only a trifle, the abounding instances of Hindu iconoclasm, thoroughly integrated in Hindu political culture, can reasonably be expected to number tens of thousands. Yet, Eatons list, given without reference to primary sources, contains, even in a maximalist reading (i.e. counting two when one king takes away two idols from one enemys royal temple), only 18 individual cases.¹⁰ This even includes the case of probably Buddhist idols installed in a Shiva temple by Govinda III, the Rashtrakuta conqueror of Kanchipuram, not after seizing them but after accepting them as a pre-emptive tribute offered by the fearful king of Sri Lanka.

In this list, cases of actual destruction amount to exactly two: Bengali troops sought revenge on king Lalitaditya by destroying what they thought was the image of Vishnu Vaikuntha, the state deity of Lalitadityas kingdom in Kashmir¹¹, and: In the early tenth century, the Rashtrakuta monarch Indra III not only destroyed the temple of Kalapriya (at Kalpa near the Jamuna river), patronized by the Rashtrakutas deadly enemies the Pratiharas, but they took special delight in recording the fact.¹²

The latter is the *only* instance of temple destruction in the list, eventhough rhetorical sleight-of-hand introduces it as representative of a larger phenomenon: While the dominant pattern here was one of looting royal temples and carrying off images of state deities, we also hear of Hindu kings engaging in the destruction of royal temples of their adversaries.¹³

So, what is the dominant pattern in the sixteen remaining cases? As we saw in the case of the Lankan idols in Kanchipuram, the looted (or otherwise acquired) idols were respectfully installed in a temple in the conquerors seat of power, e.g. a solid gold image of Vishnu Vaikuntha, seized earlier by the Pratihara king Herambapala, was seized from the Pratiharas by the Candella king Yasovarman and installed in the Lakshmana temple of Khajuraho.¹⁴ So, the worship of the image continued, albeit in a new location; and the worship in the old location was equally allowed to continue, albeit with a new idol as the old and prestigious one had been taken away. In both places, the existing system of worship was left intact.

This is in radical contrast with Islamic iconoclasm, which was meant to disrupt Hindu worship and symbolize or announce its definitive and complete annihilation. There is no case of an Islamic conqueror seizing a Hindu idol and taking it to his capital for purposes of continuing its worship there. Hindu conquerors did not want to destroy or even humiliate or disrupt the religion of the defeated state. On the contrary, in most cases, the winning and the defeated party shared the same religion and were in no mood to dishonour it in any way. The situation with Islamic conquerors is quite the opposite.

That is why Eaton fails to come up with the key evidence for his thesis of a native Hindu origin of Muslim iconoclasm. He can show us not a single document testifying that a Muslim conqueror committed acts of iconoclasm in imitation of an existing local Hindu tradition. On the contrary, when Islamic iconoclasts cared to justify their acts in writing, it was invariably with reference to the Islamic doctrine and the Prophets precedents of idol-breaking and of the war of extermination against idolatry.

No advanced education and specialistic knowledge is required to see the radical difference between the handful of cases of alleged Hindu iconoclasm and the thousands of certified Islamic cases of proudly self-described iconoclasm. It is like the difference between an avid reader stealing a book from the library and a barbarian burning the library down. In one case, an idol is taken away from a temple, with respectful greetings to the officiating priest, in order to re-install it in another temple and restart its worship. in the other case, an idol is taken away from the ruins of a temple, with a final kick against the priests severed head, in order to install it in a lavatory for continuous profanation and mockery. Of the last two sentences, a secularist only retains the part that an idol is taken away from a temple, and decides that its all the same.

For Prof. Eatons information, it may be recalled that an extreme and willful superficiality regarding all matters religious is a key premise of Nehruvian secularism. While such an anti-scholarly attitude may be understandable in the case of political activists parachuted into academic positions in Delhi, there is no decent reason why an American scholar working in the relative quiet of Tucson, Arizona, should play their game.

6.3. Temples and mosques as political centres

Prof. Eaton develops at some length the secularist theory that temple destruction came about, not as the result of an essentialized theology of iconoclasm felt to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion¹⁵, but as an added symbolic dimension of the suppression of rebellions. In some cases this has an initial semblance of credibility, e.g.: Before marching to confront Shivaji himself, however, the Bijapur general [Afzal Khan] first proceeded to Tuljapur and desecrated a temple dedicated to the goddess Bhavani, to which Shivaji and his family had been personally devoted.¹⁶

Yet, the theory breaks down when the fate of mosques associated with rebellion are considered. Eaton himself mentions cases which ought to have alerted him to the undeniably religious discrimination in the decision of which places of worship to desecrate, e.g. Aurangzeb destroyed temples in Jodhpur patronized by a former supporter of Dara Shikoh, the emperor's brother and arch-rival.¹⁷ But Dara Shikoh surely also had Muslim supporters who did their devotions and perhaps even their intrigue-plotting in mosques? Indeed, as a votary of Hindu-Muslim syncretism, he certainly also frequented mosques himself. So why did Aurangzeb not bother to demolish those mosques, if his motive was merely to punish rebels?

Eaton describes how a Sufi dissident, Shaikh Muhammadi, was persecuted by Aurangzeb for teaching deviant religious doctrines, and sought refuge in a mosque. Aurangzeb managed to arrest him, but did not demolish the mosque. This incident plainly contradicts the secularist claim that if any temple destructions took place at all, the reason was nonreligious, viz. the suppression of rebellion located in the temples affected. As per Eatons own data, we find that intrigues and rebellions involving mosques never led to the destruction of the mosque.

He even admits in so many words: No evidence, however, suggests that ruling authorities attacked public monuments like mosques or Sufi shrines that had been patronized by disloyal or rebellious officers. Nor were such monuments desecrated when one Indo-Muslim kingdom conquered another and annexed its territories.¹⁸

Eaton tries to get around this as follows: This incident suggests that mosques in Mughal India, though religiously potent, were considered detached from both sovereign terrain and dynastic authority, and hence politically inactive. As such, their desecration could have had no relevance to the business of disestablishing a regime that had patronized them.¹⁹

One wonders on what planet Eaton has been living lately. In the present age, we frequently hear of mosques as centres of Islamic political activism, not just in Delhi or Lahore or Cairo but even in New York. Sectarian warfare, as between Shias and Sunnis, always emanated from mosques almost by definition, and inter-Muslim clan or dynastic rivalries likewise crystallized around centres of preaching. The Friday prayers always include a prayer for the Islamic ruler, and Islamic doctrine never separates political from religious concerns. If Muslim rulers chose to respect the mosques, it was definitely not because these were unconnected to politics.

Eaton continues: Not surprisingly, then, when Hindu rulers established their authority over territories of defeated Muslim rulers, they did not as a rule desecrate mosques or shrines, as, for example, when Shivaji established a Maratha kingdom on the ashes of Bijapurs former dominions in Maharashtra, or when Vijayanagara annexed the former territories of the Bahmanis or their successors.²⁰

Once people have interiorized a certain framework of interpretation, they become capable of disregarding obvious facts which dont fit their schemes. In this case, when explaining Hindu non-iconoclasm, Eaton insists on the contrived and demonstrably false theory of the political irrelevance of mosques, even though a far simpler and well documented explanation is staring him in the face: unlike Muslims, Hindus disapproved of iconoclasm and preferred a universal respect for peoples religious sensibilities.

6.4. Raja Bhojas temple

Contrary to the impression created in the secularist media, Prof. Eaton has not even begun to refute Sita Ram Goels thesis. He manages to leave all the arguments for Goels main thesis of an Islamic theology of iconoclasm undiscussed. Of Goels basic data in the fabled list of mosques standing on the ruins of temples, only a single one is mentioned: an

inscription dated 1455, found over the doorway of a tomb-shrine in Dhar, Madhya Pradesh which mentions the destruction of a Hindu temple by one Abdullah Shah Changal during the reign of Raja Bhoja, a renowned Paramara king who had ruled over the region from 1010 to 1053.²¹

In the main text, Eaton seems to be saying that Goel is an uncritical amateur who accepts the inscriptions reference to temple destruction more or less at face value, as though it were a contemporary newspaper account reporting an objective fact. But in footnote, he has to admit that Goel is entirely aware of the chronological problems surrounding old inscriptions: Goel does, however, consider it more likely that the event took place during the reign of Raja Bhoja II in the late thirteenth century rather than during that of Raja Bhoja I in the eleventh century.²²

Either way, the inscription is considerably younger than the events recorded in it. In history, it is of course very common that strictly contemporary records of an event are missing, yet the event is known through secondary younger records. These have to be treated with caution (just like the strictly contemporary sources, written from a more lively knowledge of the event, but also often in a more distortive partisan involvement in it), yet they cannot be ignored. Eaton makes the most of this time distance, arguing that the inscription is hardly contemporary and presents a richly textured legend elaborated over many generations of oral transmission until 1455. Therefore, we cannot know with certainty whether the described temple destruction ever took place.²³

So, at the time of my writing it has been twelve years since Goel published his list, and exactly one scholar has come forward to challenge exactly one item in the list; who, instead of proving it wrong, settles for the ever-safe suggestion that it could do with some extra research. *Given the eagerness of a large and well-funded crowd of academics and intellectuals to prove Goel wrong, I would say that that meagre result amounts to a mighty vindication.* And the fact remains that the one inscription that we do have on the early history of the Islamic shrine under discussion, does posit a temple destruction. So far, the balance of evidence is on the side of the temple destruction scenario, and if the evidence for it is merely non-

contemporary, the evidence for the nondemolition scenario is simply nonexistent.

For arguments sake, we may imagine that Eaton is right, and that the inscription merely invented the temple destruction. That would only mean Eaton is right on this point of detail, but also that the very same inscription proves his main thesis wrong. For, suppose no temple was destroyed, yet the Islamic inscription claims the opposite. In Eatons own words: Central to the story are themes of conversion, martyrdom, redemption, and the patronage of sacred sites by indo-Muslim royalty, as well as, of course, the destruction of a temple.²⁴ Temple destruction is thus deemed central to Indo-Muslim identity, even to the point where local histories free of real temple destruction would be supplied with imaginary temple destructions, - so as to fit the pattern deemed genuinely Islamic. This would illustrate how the Muslims themselves believed in (and were consequently susceptible to further motivation by) an essentialized theology of iconoclasm felt to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion - what Eaton dismisses elsewhere as a wrong explanations.²⁵

For the rest, all that Eaton has to show against Goels thesis is that it is based on selective translations of premodem Persian chronicles, together with a selective use of epigraphic data²⁶ However, the larger a body of evidence, the harder it becomes to credibly dismiss it as selective. Goels hundreds of convergent testimonies cannot be expelled from the discussion so lightly. But improvement is always possible, and we are ready to learn from scholars with higher standards, drawing their conclusions from a wider and less selective body of evidence. Unfortunately, Prof.Eaton has failed to cite us any paper or book on Indo-Muslim iconoclasm which is less selective. His own studied silence on each one of the testimonies cited by Goel amounts to a selective favouritism towards the data seemingly supporting the secularist theory.

It is of course true that there *are* cases (and Eaton delights the secularists by citing some new ones) where Muslim rulers allowed Hindu temples to function, to be repaired, even to be built anew. This was never disputed by Goel, for these cases of tolerance firstly do not nullify the cases of iconoclasm, and secondly they do not nullify the link between iconoclasm

and Islamic theology. Muslim rulers were human beings, and all manner of circumstances determined to what extent they implemented Islamic injunctions. Many were rulers first and Muslims second. Often they had to find a *modus vivendi* with the Hindu majority in order to keep fellow Muslim sectarian or dynastic rivals off their own backs, and in order to avoid Hindu rebellion. But that is no merit of Islam itself, merely a testimony to the strength which Hindu society retained even at its lowest ebb. To the extent that Muslim rulers took their Islam seriously, a world free of Paganism and idol-temples remained their stated Quranic ideal, but political and military power equations often kept them from actively pursuing it.

Richard Eatons paper is the best attempt by far to defend the secularist alternative to the properly historical explanation of Islamic iconoclasm as being based on Islamic doctrine. Yet he fails to offer any data which are incompatible with the latter explanation. There is no reason to doubt his good faith, but like many people with strong convictions, he somehow slips into a selective use of data, contrived interpretations and special pleading, all converging on a single aim: exculpating Islam itself from its own record of iconoclasm.

According to the cover text on his book, Eaton is professor of History at the University of Arizona and a leading historian of Islam. Had he defended the thesis that iconoclasm is rooted in Islam itself, he would have done justice to the evidence from Islamic sources, yet he would have found it very hard to get published by Oxford University Press or reach the status of leading Islam scholar that he now enjoys. One can easily become an acclaimed scholar of Hinduism by lambasting and vilifying that religion, but Islam is somehow more demanding of respect.

Footnotes:

¹Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, OUP, Delhi 2000, p. 128.

²Hasan Nizami: *Tajul Maasir*, in H.M. Elliott and J. Dowson: *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol.2, p.223; emphasis

added. Note that unlike Sita Ram Goel, Richard Eaton is not chided by the likes of Sanjay Subramaniam for using Elliott and Dowsons colonialist translation.

³*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p.128.*

⁴*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p.94. This misrepresents the thrust of Goels book as being merely a morbid piling up of gruesome Muslim crimes rather than an insightful tracing of this behaviour pattern to its ideological roots. Goels long and unchallenged list of temple destruction data is explicitly offered as a preliminary survey in the smaller first volume before developing the books main thesis in the bigger second volume, viz. the explicit justification of iconoclasm by Islamic theology and the normative precedent set Prophet Mohammed.*

⁵*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 123 n.*

⁶*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 112.*

⁷*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 113.*

⁸*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states. Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 105.*

⁹*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 106.*

¹⁰*Richard Eaton: Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History, p. 106-107. Most cases are cited from Richard H. Davis: Lives of Indian Images, Princeton University Press, 1997.*

¹¹Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 106.

¹²Sic, Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 107.

¹³Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 107.

¹⁴Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 106.

¹⁵Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 105.

¹⁶Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 118.

¹⁷Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 120.

¹⁸Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 122.

¹⁹Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 123.

²⁰Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 123. He adds that the Vijayanagara kings built mosques themselves, evidently to accommodate the sizable number of Muslims employed in their armed forces, - a reliance on Muslim mercenaries which would become Vijayanagaras undoing, as they proved disloyal during the crucial battle of Talikota in 1565.

²¹Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p. 96.

[22](#)Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p.96.

[23](#)Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p.97-98.

[24](#)Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p.98.

[25](#)Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p.105.

[26](#)Richard Eaton: *Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states, Essays on Islam and Indian History*, p.96.

7. Why Did Aurangzeb Demolish the Kashi Vishvanath Temple?

Moghul emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir (r.1658-1707) is an icon of Islamic iconoclasm in India. His name counts as synonymous with destruction of Hindu temples, though he also levelled many Hindu human beings. Yet, the dominant school of historians would like to salvage Aurangzebs reputation.

Percival Spear, co-author (with Romila Thapar) of the prestigious *Penguin History of India*, writes: Aurangzebs supposed intolerance is little more than a hostile legend based on isolated acts such as the erection of a mosque on a temple site in Benares.¹ This claim, warhorse of the secularist school of history-rewriting, provides us with an excellent case study in the ongoing historians conflict in India.

What are the facts? The official court chronicle, *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*, fills many pages with items like this His majesty proceeded to Chitor on the 1st of Safar. Temples to the number of sixty-three were here demolished. Abu Tarab, who had been commissioned to effect the destruction of the idol temples in Amber, reported in person on the 24th Rajab, that threescore and six of these edifices had been levelled with the ground.² It says in so many words that Aurangzeb ordered all provincial governors to destroy all schools and temples of the Pagans and to make a complete end to all Pagan teachings and practices. Moreover, it records: Hasan Ali Khan came and said that 172 temples in the area had been destroyed, etc. Aurangzebs supposed intolerance can be deduced from his actual policies, known to us through his own chronicles as well as other sources.

And, to close a loophole favoured by evasive secular apologists when their whitewash fails, his policies were not a deviation from true, tolerant Islam by an idiosyncratic fanatic, but were seen by his contemporaries as pure Islam in full swing. Aurangzeb was a pious man full of self-discipline and eager to be a just and truly Islamic ruler. One of his officers wrote a collection of anecdotes, the *Abkam-i-Alamgiry*, showing the humane and

incorruptible character of Aurangzeb. It carries anecdote titles like: Aurangzeb preaches humility to an officer, ability the only qualification for office, or (about a case where a governor had ordered an execution of a man without the required proof of his guilt) trials to be held strictly according to Quranic law.³ Aurangzeb was a good man and a good Muslim, and his oppression of Hindus was not due to an evil personal trait but to his commitment to Islam.

About Benares/Varanasi, we learn from the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*: News came to court that in accordance with the Emperors command his officers had demolished the temple of Vishvanath at Banaras.⁴ Aurangzeb did not just build an isolated mosque on a destroyed temple. He ordered all temples destroyed, among them the Kashi Vishvanath, one of the most sacred places of Hinduism, and had mosques built on a number of cleared temple sites. Till today, the old Kashi Vishvanath temple wall is visible as a part of the walls of the Gyanvapi mosque which Aurangzeb had built at the site. All other Hindu sacred places within his reach equally suffered destruction, with mosques built on them; among them, Krishnas birth temple in Mathura and the rebuilt Somnath temple on the coast of Gujarat. The number of temples destroyed by Aurangzeb is counted in 4, if not in 5 figures.

This is how Indian secularists deal with this episode: Did Muslim rulers destroy temples? Some of them certainly did. Following the molestation of a local princess by some priests in a temple at Benaras, Aurangzeb ordered the total destruction of the temple and rebuilt it at a nearby site. And this is the only temple he is believed to have destroyed.⁵ This story is now repeated *ad nauseam*, not only in the extremist Muslim press (Syed Shahabuddins *Muslim India*, the Jamaati-Islamis *Radiance*) and in the secularist press (e.g. *Sunday*, as quoted) but also in academic platforms by eminent historians.⁶

JNU historian Prof. K.N. Panikkar offers a more political variation on the theme that the Kashi Vishwanath temple was destroyed to punish the temple priests for breaking purely secular laws: the destruction of the temple at Banaras also had political motives. It appears that a nexus between the sufi rebels and the pandits of the temple existed and it was primarily to smash

this nexus that Aurangzeb ordered action against the temple.⁷ The eminent historian quotes no source for this strange allegation. In those days, Pandits avoided to even talk with Mlecchas, let alone to concoct intrigues with them.⁸

The fountainhead of all these rumors about Aurangzebs honorable and non-religious motives in destroying the Kashi Vishvanath temple is revealed by Marxist historian Gargi Chakravarty who quotes Gandhian politician B.N. Pande, introducing the quotation as follows: Much has been said about Aurangzebs demolition order of Vishwanath temple at Banaras. But documentary evidence gives a new dimension to the whole episode.⁹

What follows is the story launched by the late B.N. Pande, working chairman of the Gandhi Darshan Samiti and former Governor of Orissa: The story regarding demolition of Vishvanath temple is that while Aurangzeb was passing near Varanasi on his way to Bengal, the Hindu Rajas in his retinue requested that if the halt was made for a day, their Ranis may go to Varanasi, have a dip in the Ganges and pay their homage to Lord Vishwanath. Aurangzeb readily agreed. Army pickets were posted on the five mile route to Varanasi. The Ranis made a journey on the Palkis. They took their dip in the Ganges and went to the Vishwanath temple to pay their homage. After offering Puja all the Ranis returned except one, the Maharani of Kutch. A thorough search was made of the temple precincts but the Rani was to be found nowhere. When Aurangzeb came to know of it, he was very much enraged. He sent his senior officers to search for the Rani. Ultimately, they found that the statue of Ganesh which was fixed in the wall was a moveable one. When the statue was moved, they saw a flight of stairs that led to the basement. To their horror, they found the missing Rani dishonored and crying, deprived of all her ornaments. The basement was just beneath Lord Vishwanaths seat. The Rajas expressed their vociferous protests. As the crime was heinous, the Rajas demanded exemplary action. Aurangzeb ordered that as the sacred precincts have been despoiled, Lord Vishwanath may be moved to some other place, the temple be razed to the ground and the Mahant be arrested and punished.¹⁰

The story is very bizarre, to say the least. First of all, it has Aurangzeb go to Bengal. Yet, in all the extant histories of his life and works, no such

journey to Bengal, or even any journey as far east as Varanasi, is recorded. Some of his generals were sent on expeditions to Bengal, but not Aurangzeb himself. There are fairly complete chronicles of his doings, day by day; could B.N. Pande or any of his quoters give the date or even the year of this remarkable episode? Neither was Aurangzeb known to surround himself with Hindu courtiers. And did these Rajas take their wives along on military expeditions? Or was it some holiday picnic? How could the Mahant kidnap a Rani who was there in the company of other Ranis, as well as the appropriate courtiers and bodyguards? Why did he take such risk? Why did the Rajas wait for Aurangzeb to take exemplary action: did they fear his anger if they destroyed the temple themselves? And since when is demolition the approved method of purifying a defiled temple, an eventuality for which the Shastras have laid down due ritual procedures?

One question which we can readily answer is, where did B.N. Pande get this story from? He himself writes: Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, in his famous book *The Feathers and the Stones*, has narrated this fact based on documentary evidence.¹¹ So, let us turn to this book, now hard to find, to see what the documentary evidence is on which this whole wave of pro-Aurangzeb rumours is based, but which no one has cared to reproduce or even just specify.¹²

Gandhian Congress leader Pattabhi Sitaramayya wrote in his prison diary: There is a popular belief that Aurangazeb was a bigot in religion. This, however, is combated by a certain school. His bigotry is illustrated by one or two instances. The building of a mosque over the site of the original Kasi Visveswara Temple is one such. A like mosque in Mathura is another. The revival of jazia is a third but of a different order. A story is told in extenuation of the first event. In the height of his glory, Aurangazeb like any foreign king in a country, had in his entourage a number of Hindu nobles. They all set out one day to see the sacred temple of Benares. Amongst them was a Ranee of Cutch. When the party returned after visiting the Temple, the Ranee of Cutch was missing. They searched for her in and out, East, North, West and South but no trace of her was noticeable. At last, a more diligent search revealed a Tah Khana or an underground story of the temple which to all appearances had only two

storys. When the passage to it was found barred, they broke open the doors and found inside the pale shadow of the Ranee bereft of her jewellery. It turned out that the Mahants were in the habit of picking out wealthy and be-jewelled pilgrims and in guiding them to see the temple, decoying them to the underground cellar and robbing them of their jewellery. What exactly would have happened to their life one did not know. Anyhow in this case, there was no time for mischief as the search was diligent and prompt. On discovering the wickedness of the priests, Aurangazeb declared that such a scene of robbery could not be the House of God and ordered it to be forthwith demolished. And the ruins were left there. But the Ranee who was thus saved insisted on a Musjid being built on the ruin and to please her, one was subsequently built. That is how a Musjid has come to exist by the side of the Kasi Visweswar temple which is no temple in the real sense of the term but a humble cottage in which the marble Siva Linga is housed. Nothing is known about the Mathura Temple. This story of the Benares Masjid was given in a rare manuscript in Lucknow which was in the possession of a respected Mulla who had read it in the Ms. and who though he promised to look it up and give the Ms. to a friend, to whom he had narrated the story, died without fulfilling his promise. The story is little known and the prejudice, we are told, against Aurangazeb persists.¹³

So, this is where the story comes from: an unnamed friend of an unnamed acquaintance of Sitaramayya knew of a manuscript, but he took the details of it with him in his grave. This hearsay in the third degree is the document on which secularist journalists and historians base their evidence of Aurangzebs fair and secularist disposition. This is how they go about exploding the myth of Islamic iconoclasm. Their debunking of genuine history as preserved and presented by Hindu historians stands exposed as sheer bluff.

Footnotes:

¹P. Spear: *History of India*, p-56.

²Muhammad Saki Mustaid Khan: *Maâsir Alamgîrî*, in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson: *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*

(Low Price reprint, Delhi 1990, originally 1867-77), vol. 7, p. 188.

³Translated by Jadunath Sarkar: *Anecdotes of Aurangzeb*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1988 (1912).

⁴Also discussed by A. Shourie: *Take over from the Experts*, app. I in VHP: *History vs. Casuistry* (first edition, Voice of India, Delhi 1991), p.81.

⁵Namita Bhandare, Louise Fernandes and Minu Jain: *A Pampered Minority?*, Sunday, 7-2-1993. The Kashi Vishvanath temple was indeed rebuilt at a nearby site, but of course not by Aurangzeb, who had a mosque built at the original site instead.

⁶The expression eminent historians gained some notoriety (and became a laughing-stock in Hindu Revivalist circles) during the Ayodhya debate, when it was the standard media description of a group of Marxist historians from JNU, including Prof. K.N. Panikkar, who circulated a booklet *The Political Abuse of History* (INU 1989) denying the evidence that the Babri Masjid had forcibly replaced a Rama temple.

⁷K.N. Panikkar: *What is Communalism Today?*, in Pratul Lahiri, ed.: *Selected Writings on Communalism*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi 1994, p.73.

⁸The unwillingness to come close to those who do not follow the Brahminical purity rules is still alive. When I interviewed the Puri Shankaracharya in 1993, he did not want to accept a book I offered him, and was reluctant to speak directly with me, but preferred to address my companion, the late Jeevan Kulkani, a historian with Hindu Mahasabha links and a thoroughbred Brahmin.

⁹G. Chakravartty: *BJP/RSS and Distortion of History*", in P. Lahiri: *Selected Writings on Communalism*, p. 168.

[10](#)B.N. Pande: *Islam and Indian Culture*, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna 1987, p.44-45.

[11](#)B.N. Pande: *Islam and Indian Culture*, p.45. He adds: Dr. P.L. Gupta, former curator of Patna Museum, has also corroborated this incident. But if this P.L. Gupta had anything to add in his capacity of historian, B.N. Pande would not have failed to reproduce it. Instead, the more likely explanation is that Gupta simply had read the same book (quite popular in Gandhian circles after its publication in 1946) which Pande quoted as his source.

[12](#)I thank Prof. Gopal Krishna and his wife Elizabeth for helping me find my way in the New Bodleian Library (oxford), where a rare copy of *Feathers and Stones* was available.

[13](#)Pattabhi Sitaramayya: *Feathers and Stones*, Bombay 1946, p. 177-178.

8. From Ayodhya to Nazareth

Indian Christians and their allies in the international media have mostly taken the Muslim side in the Ayodhya dispute. This was the reason for the following open letter to the Church dignitaries, written in the last days of the year 1999, the occasion being the emergence of a vaguely similar problem in Nazareth. Muslims had illegally started building a mosque next to a church, and the Israeli authorities had not dared to interfere. It may be added now (February 2002) that in the context of the second intifada and the ongoing Israeli crackdown on Islamic terrorism, Israeli Minister and former Soviet dissident Nathan Sharansky has ordered the construction work to be stopped.

8.1. A mosque casts its shadow on a church

In Nazareth, a church (Basilica) marks the place where the angel announced to Mary that she was about to be impregnated with Jesus, God's only-begotten son, the long awaited messiah. This church of Annunciation is one of the foci of Christian life in Palestine. However, the Christian community in Palestine and the whole Middle East is dwindling, in percentage if not in absolute figures, due to their observing more modern birth rates than their Muslim countrymen, and due to the emigration of numerous young Christians who see no future for themselves in a Muslim dominated part of the world. Even in Nazareth the Muslims are now in a majority, and with a Muslim-dominated Palestinian Authority now in power, the local Muslim community feels confident enough for a showdown.

So, on 22 November 1999, the foundation stone for a mighty and magnificent mosque was laid in a square adjoining the Church. The Christian community had planned the construction of a Venice-type plaza there, to accommodate the numerous Christian and other visitors from all over the world. After all, the sacred sites of Christianity are not all that numerous, and those which exist deserve appropriate care. If the Muslims really needed an extra mosque, they could have built it anywhere. A

diplomatic Saudi prince had even offered to finance the mosque if it were built elsewhere, but his offer was spurned. By contrast, the place of the Annunciation is not moveable, so Christians could not make any concessions short of allowing the humiliation of their sacred site as but a stand-in-the-way of the mosque. The Muslims would not see reason and went ahead with their confrontational plan.

Most Palestinian Christians find this development gruesome. According to local Franciscan nun Sister Renee, the Muslims want to trample and humiliate the Christians. The minaret of the mosque will tower over the basilica¹. The Pope came out in support of the Christians of Nazareth, and ordered all Catholic churches in the Holy Land closed for two days in protest. Yasser Arafats Palestinian Authority (PA) formally distanced itself from the Islamic ceremony (in order to curry favour with the Christian world so as to strengthen its own diplomatic position vis-A-vis Israel), but did nothing to prevent it. The presiding Muslim leader, Ahmad Abu Nawaf, was not troubled for taking a defiant and confrontational stand, openly exulting in this Islamic victory.

The incident must have reminded the Pope of the Muslim plans for building a mosque in Rome dwarfing the Popes own Saint Peters Basilica. The Italian authorities disallowed this symbolic show of strength but the mosque which came up close to the Vatican is still impressive enough, and contrasts mightily with the absence of any Christian place of worships for hundreds of miles around Mecca. Because Saudi Arabia has declared the whole of its territory to be a mosque, no expressions of non-Islamic devotion are allowed there in any form whatsoever.

In the circumstances, I cannot omit a vote of sympathy for the Palestinian Christians who find themselves besieged by an arrogant Islamic movement. However, I also want to propose to the Christian leadership, including the Pope and Indian Church leaders like Bishop Alan de Lastic, a few points to ponder.

8.2. Christians apologizing to Muslims

First of all, Your Eminences, the last couple of years, the Catholic Church and many Protestant Churches and Christian laymens groups have been

bending over backwards to convince Muslims and others about their own heartfelt repentance over the crimes committed by Christian states and institutions in the past centuries. But it seems this has not moved the heart of the Muslim world.

The Pope himself has said sorry for the Crusades, even though these were but a Christian counter-offensive in a long-drawn-out war which Islam had unilaterally inflicted on Christianity ever since Prophet Mohammeds failed invasion of the East-Roman Empire, not long before his death in A.D. 632. Hardly four years later, after suppressing the Arab national revolt against Islam (the *Ridda*, return to the ancestral religion), Islamic armies invaded and occupied the Levantine part of the Byzantine empire, and reduced Christians to third-class citizens without political rights. During and after this blitz offensive by Caliph Omar in A.D. 636, many churches were turned into mosques, Christians were sometimes forced to convert, but more often put under structural pressure by the imposition of a toleration tax plus a number of humiliating restraints on their rights.

Next came the conquest of Christian North Africa, effectively destroying Christianity in Tunisia, Saint Augustines homeland, and in the Maghreb. Then followed the conquest of Christian Spain, the invasion of Christian France in A.D. 731 (mercifully defeated by Charles Martel in Poitiers), the occupation of Christian Sicily, and many other unilateral Islamic acts of aggression, including the capture and sale of millions of Christians as slaves. The invasion of Byzantine Anatolia by Muslim Seljuqs in Manzikert 1071 was one of the direct causes of the Crusades. In spite of regrettable Christian excesses during the reconquest of Jerusalem in 1099 (easily matched by Sultan Baybars atrocities during the Muslim reconquest of the Crusader states), the Crusades were a legitimate attempt of the Christians to liberate their Holy Land forcibly occupied by the Muslims. Somewhat like the Hindus trying to liberate Ayodhya from Islamic occupation.

Strategically speaking, the Crusades were a forward strike in a war in which Christianity had so far been on the defensive. After the defeat of the Crusaders, the Islamic world resumed the attacks, especially in the Balkans where one Christian nation after another came under the Turkish yoke, and

as late as A.D. 1689, the Turks laid siege to Vienna. There is no doubt that Christian soldiers have misbehaved during the conquest of Jerusalem and on other occasions, but so have Muslim armies on numerous occasions, starting with Prophet Mohammed's own caravan raids, murders of skeptics and massacres of recalcitrant tribes. For every Muslim gentleman conqueror (e.g. the Kurdish general Saladin who chased the Crusaders from Jerusalem), there was a Muslim mass murderer (e.g. the Mamluk sultan Baybars who finished off the last Crusader strongholds).

All the same, an ecumenical Christian group has even conducted a pilgrimage along the Crusader route, a Walk for Reconciliation, everywhere offering apologies for what Christians in the distant past had done to the Muslims. This proved to be an exercise in self-ridicule. Thus, these self-flagellating Christian penitents went to offer their apologies to the mayor of Istanbul for the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade, forgetting that the city sacked by the Crusaders was a Greek Orthodox city where a Muslim Turk like the present mayor would be the number one enemy. Constantinople was far more definitively sacked by the Turks in 1453, and the Turkish mayor represented the Turkish occupation force which has, unlike the Crusaders, destroyed the Greek character of the city and nearly annihilated the millennia-old Greek presence in Constantinople and nearby Ionia. Addressing an apology for the temporary inconvenience which the Crusaders had inflicted on the Greeks to a mayor representing a conquering nation which definitively destroyed the Greeks of Asia Minor: only Liberation theologians could get that silly.

So, if apologies have to be tendered, let Muslim dignitaries start the exchange. Let the mayor of Istanbul apologize to his Christian visitors for representing a religion which killed and enslaved millions of Christians. Let the Turks apologize to the Greeks for sacking and occupying their capital, Constantinople. Better still, let them restore Constantinople to the Greek Orthodox Christians. But for now, the position is that the Muslims world is not even willing to refrain from the provocation in Nazareth.

8.3. Christian understanding of the Hindu position

Secondly, Your Eminences, you might reconsider your haughty condemnation of the Hindu position regarding disputed sacred sites. In

Ayodhya, a mosque had been imposed right on the site of a destroyed Hindu temple, but you joined the Muslim-Marxist choir in denouncing these petty-minded and fanatical Hindus reclaiming their sacred site. Why the fuss about a temple when God is everywhere?, you pontificated.

Now you are being put to a similar test. In Nazareth, your Basilica was not even touched. The Muslims have a place for the prophet Jesus in their system, not for the idolatrous demon Rama, so they showed more tolerance in Nazareth than in Ayodhya. And yet, look what a fuss you are making over a mosque neatly juxtaposed to a church, perfectly respecting its existence though not perhaps its breathing space.

To be sure, I understand that for Christians, sacred sites are a touchy issue. In Islamic and Communist countries, numerous churches have been destroyed or put to no Christian uses; but on the other hand, so many of those churches had been built in forcible replacement of Pagan places of worship. Thus, the Mezquita, the cathedral of Cordoba, used to be a mosque, which in turn had been built in forcible replacement of a church, but that ancient church had in its turn been built in forcible replacement of a Roman temple.

Just recently, the Greco-Scything city of Chersoness on the Crimea Peninsula has witnessed a controversy between the Greek Orthodox Church, which is reclaiming an abbey stolen and abused by the Communists, and the archaeologists, who first want to find out what exactly is lying underneath the premises, known to have been a Pagan cultic site. The Churches cannot rock the boat of sacred sites controversy too badly, for there are too many skeletons in their own cupboards.

8.4. Muslims challenging Christianity in Europe

Thirdly, Your Eminences, recent developments in Nazareth and many other places ought to make you more receptive to the general Hindu distrust of Islam. In the week before Christmas, some fifty people were killed in Muslim Christian riots in Indonesia, adding their numbers to the many hundreds killed during the past year in that country alone, not to speak of thousands of Christians killed in East Timor, nor of the handfuls of Christians killed now and then by Islamic guerrilleros in the Philippines.

Let us not make the picture more complicated by mentioning the hundreds if not thousands of Hindus killed in Indias Northeast by Christian separatists, lets only consider killings of Christians. We then see a strange pattern emerge. Compared with the fuss you made over the deaths of just two priests, a Keralite Catholic and an Australian Protestant, plus the two sons of the latter, killings for which you prematurely blamed the Hindus, your outcry over Islamic atrocities is remarkably subdued.

In the case of Nazareth, Church dignitaries have indeed spoken out. But look, a similarly strange moderation in your anti-Islamic protest strikes the eye of the beholder. The sharpest allegation is addressed not to the Muslims who are encroaching on what you consider to be Christian territory, but to the Israeli authorities. Israel is trying to drive a wedge between Palestinian Christians and Muslims, you say. But pray, if Israel meant you any harm, why has it left the Annunciation Basilica in peace for decades? You might reasonably accuse Israel of giving in to the party from which it fears the most serious trouble, viz. Muslims rather than Christians. But Israel is not doing more than that: giving in to pressure exerted by another party, viz. the Muslims. If it wasnt for the Muslims claiming the site, Israel couldnt have ruled in their favour. So, what keeps you from laying blame at the door where it belongs?

The answer is obvious: fear. If even combative Israel feels it has to throw some crumbs to the Islamic fanatics, such as space for a mosque in Nazareth, what else can we expect of the Church? The fact is that the fear of Islam is increasingly gripping our aged Church Fathers by the throat. Ancient strongholds of European resistance to Islam are now home to imposing five-star mosques: Madrid, capital of Reconquista Spain; Paris, whence the Frankish Crusaders once left to liberate the Holy Land; even Rome itself. At the recent Bishops Synod in Rome (October 1999), several Bishops expressed their worries about Islams encroachment on the Christian world.

Consider the warnings by Mgr. Bemardini, Bishop of the Ionian city of Smyma, now better known as Izmir after the Turks killed and expelled the Greeks from there in 1922. To the analysis given by other Bishops, he added some recent anecdotes from real life, e.g.: During an official

Christian Muslim meeting, an important Muslim delegate said calmly and self-assuredly: Thanks to your democratic laws we will conquer you. Thanks to our religious laws, we will dominate you.²

And this one: A Catholic monastery in Jerusalem had an Arab servant, naturally a Muslim. He was a very courteous, friendly and honest man, greatly valued by the monks. But the converse turned out not to apply. One day he told them with sadness: Our leaders have convened and have decided that all infidels must be killed. But you need not fear: though I too will be ordered to kill you, I will do it without making you suffer. We know that a distinction must be made between the fanatics and the more peaceful majority. But even the latter will rise against us as one man when Allah so commands.

In his concluding remarks, Mgr.Bernardini returned to an issue of disputed places of worship, specifically referring to the practice of selling the empty churches of European cities to Muslims for use as mosques: To conclude, and speaking from my experience, I would at any rate advise that no Catholic church should ever be handed over to the Muslims for their worship. To them this is merely the most convincing proof of our apostasy.³

Exactly, Your Eminences, places of worship are a serious business. Apart from their symbolic meaning, they also have a tangible political dimension. Like Mgr. Bernardini, and like the Christians of Nazareth, Hindus in Ayodhya don't want to abandon their temples to eager Muslims. And rest assured that unlike churches in Europe, Hindu temples are not standing empty for lack of devotees.

Footnotes:

¹Quoted by Salomon Bouman, *De Standard*, 24-11-1999.

²Reproduced in the Catholic monthly *Nucleus*, Bruges, November 1999.

³*Nucleus*, November 1999.

9. Ayodhya and the Supreme Court

What follows is a reworked version of my paper *The Ayodhya demolition: an evaluation*, contributed to the collective volume: *The Ayodhya Reference. Supreme -Court Judgment and Commentaries* (Voice of India, Delhi 1995), which also included papers by Swapan Dasgupta, M. Rama Jois, Arun Jaitley and S.P. Gupta. The book was occasioned by the Supreme Courts decision not to help Narasimha Raos Government out of the Ayodhya dilemma by offering an opinion on the historical evidence.

9.1. The one-point reference

The North-Indian town of Ayodhya became world famous in 1989-92 when Hindus and Muslims clashed over a mosque structure used by the Hindus as a temple but claimed by the Muslims as the Babri Masjid. It made headlines worldwide on at least three occasions. The first one was when Hindus laid the foundation stone of the prospective temple on 9 November 1989, incidentally the same day when the Berlin Wall was brought down. The second time was when the Hindu activists outwitted the troops deployed by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and entered Ayodhya in large numbers, only to be shot down (with several dozen being killed) within sight of the Babri Masjid. The third and most sensational occasion was when vanguard irregulars of Hindu society destroyed the controversial structure on 6 December 1992 and replaced it with a small makeshift temple in expectation of a proper (scripturally designed) temple building.

Hindus believe that the site of the building is Ramas birthplace, and maintain that a Hindu temple adorned the site until, in 1528 at the latest, Muslims forcibly replaced it with a mosque. Muslim leaders have recently taken to denying this, though their fellow Muslims of earlier generations had proudly confirmed it.

Contrary to what the international press has written, the dispute over the Rama-Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya is not a hopeless tangle

of contending fanaticisms in which the historical truth is forever unknowable. A lot of scholarly research has been done, and the Government of India has provided the contending parties with an official forum in which experts could go through the evidence produced for both sides. This scholarly debate took place around the turn of 1991, and once more in autumn 1992. Though both rounds of debate were unilaterally broken off by one of the parties, viz. the anti-temple party, it brought to light enough evidence to support an unambiguous verdict.

Apart from this semi-official debate, there was a longdrawn-out polemic in the general publishing market, in a dozen books and hundreds of newspaper articles and columns. The polemic started in earnest in 1989 and has effectively ended with the October 1994 decision of the Supreme Court to reject the Governments one-point reference, viz. the request for a judicial verdict on the single historical question whether a temple had existed at the site until it was replaced with a mosque. Narasimha Raos government had made this request on the tacit understanding that a positive verdict would justify an acceptance of the Hindu claim on the disputed site, while a negative verdict would justify a solution in accordance with the Muslims wishes.

The one-point reference was supported by those who wanted the dispute to end, whatever the details of the eventual solution. Otherwise, it was widely objected to. Observers of Indias ramshackle institutions feared that the judiciary might not be immune to political manipulation. Some historians argued that judges are not competent on history and archaeology. Modernist supporters of the Babri Masjid cause objected that medieval state of affairs, no matter how well-proven, should not be allowed to determine todays policies. Its Islamist supporters asserted that any and every mosque deserves protection, regardless of whether it had a history of forcibly replacing a temple. Supporters of the Rama-Janmabhoomi cause objected to the idea that a firm Hindu tradition would be made the object of a contingent judgment by fallible human judges appointed by a hostile state.

So, there was a sigh of relief in many quarters when in October 1994, after more than a year of deliberations, the Supreme Court formally rejected this one-point reference regarding the history of Ayodhyas disputed site.

With that, the historical question, which would have come into full focus if the Supreme Court had accepted to consider it, seemingly lost its political relevance and disappeared from public debate.

For at least three reasons, this was a correct decision. In fact, it was correct for more and better reasons than the judges themselves realised.

The formal reason is the matter of competence: historical questions should be decided by impartial scholars, not by judges. In practice, judges often have to base their verdicts at least partly on opinions about matters beyond their strict competence, after calling certified expert witnesses to the court. But in this case, such an opinion would not merely be an ancillary consideration in a properly judicial verdict based on the judges expertise in legal matters; it would be the whole of the verdict. Though they could legally have chosen to offer the opinion, they were equally within their rights when they opted to refuse. This point is quite straightforward, has been argued sufficiently and needs no further elaboration.

The other two reasons, by contrast, have hardly been mentioned, let alone elaborated: the historical question is in its pertinent aspects sufficiently clear; and history is not the cause of the dispute anyway. We will look into them in the next sections, before attempting a more general evaluation of the Ayodhya debate.

9.2. Why an Ayodhya debate at all?

The material reason why the judges were right not to entertain the historical question regarding Ayodhya, is that in this question, apart from details, there was nothing left to decide anyway. Until 1989, there was a complete consensus in all sources (Hindu, Muslim and European) which spoke out on the matter, viz. that the Babri Masjid had been built in forcible replacement of a Hindu temple. The 1989 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (entry Ayodhya) puts it squarely: There are few surviving monuments of any antiquity. Ramas birthplace is marked by a mosque, erected by the Moghul emperor Babur in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple.

Apart from local tradition, architectural indications, supporting documents and archaeological evidence, this consensus had logic on its side: thousands of mosques inside and outside India do stand on demolished non-Muslim places of worship, while in every area of North India where Muslim power has reached during the Sultanate and Moghul periods, every prominent temple has been demolished. Therefore, all that the consensus claimed, was that the general rule, verified in thousands of places in India and thousands more in other countries, applied in this particular case (the central hill of the temple town of Ayodhya) as well. To affirm that the general rule also applies in a given particular case, is the most modest claim one can possibly make. He who makes the opposite claim, viz. that the given particular case forms an exception to the rule, must logically accept the burden of proof.

In normal scholarly practice, the debate on the object of such a consensus is only reopened when new evidence surfaces. Scholars have more promising questions to figure out, so they dont waste time on settled affairs. The eminent historians from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) *et al.*, who insisted on revising the consensus have not shown such evidence, no new fact nor credible new interpretation of known facts. Instead, they have constructed purely speculative hypotheses (like the British conspiracy to float demolition stories in order to divide and rule) which are in conflict with all available knowledge and remain in need of supporting evidence themselves.

In the entire corpus of Ayodhya arguments, including the minutes of the Government-sponsored debates of DecemberJanuary 1990-1991 and October-November 1992 between scholars mandated by the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), I have not come across any piece of evidence which would warrant the reopening of the question in any normal scholarly context. On the contrary, what new evidence has surfaced, has only confirmed the old consensus: new documentary and esp. archaeological evidence confirms that a Hindu temple stood at the Babri Masjid site. The Supreme Court judges could not have added anything to this unambiguous *status quaestionis*.

Of course, some as yet undecided historical details may remain of interest to scholars. Thus, it is unlikely that the demolition which was followed by the construction of the Babri mosque, was the first temple demolition on the Rama Janmabhoomi site. The temple from which historians claim to have recovered an inscription in the Babri debris on 6 December 1992 was built around 1100 A.D., i.e. well after Mahmud Ghaznavis raids. It is most likely that during the Ghorid and Sultanate periods (1192-1526), the RamaJanmabhoomi site suffered a fate similar to the Somnath site in Prabhas Patan, Gujarat: temple demolition followed by reconstruction followed by yet another demolition, mosque built by Muslim invaders but reclaimed by the Hindus and temporarily used as a makeshift temple, etc. The RamaJanmabhoomi site had probably been desecrated a number of times before Babar and A& Baqi set foot in Ayodhya.

In various intemet discussion lists and other forums, this observation of mine has been quoted by anti-temple polemicists to counter the unreflected claim of some Hindutva publications that the original ancient temple itself is the one which Babars men destroyed. It is true that unlike the hardliners in both contending parties, who are so terribly sure of their theories, I readily admit that in the said period, much remains obscure about the exact chain of events between the original Hindu temple and the Babri mosque. Thus, architectural indications have been pointed out for a preMoghul construction of the mosque, implying that it was not built by Babar but more likely by the Sharqi sultans of jaunpur in the early 15th century.¹

The entirely disproportionate size of the domes in relation to the walls and the patchwork² nature of the building indicates an eventful history, probably including partial demolition, re-employment for different purposes and reconstruction. This scenario has plenty of room for periods of Hindu use of the site, either thanks to temporary unilateral acquisition of the site, or by consent of the Muslim authorities when they needed Hindu support against Muslim rivals. This was the case in the final years of the Sultanate, and - more definitely attested - in the post-Aurangzeb period of the Moghul empire, when the Muslims acquiesced in a Hindu presence at the site, materialized in the Ram *chahootra* (platform) just metres outside the Babri mosque.³

I therefore concur with archaeologist R. Naths observation: the Hindu temple at the contentious site was devastated either by the armies of Mahmud of Ghaznin or the Delhi Sultans who captured the place and established here their provincial seat. It is quite probable, and possible too, that a mosque was first raised during the Sultanate period (1001-1030; 1192-1526) on the site of the most important temple associated with the life of Rama, and Mir Baqi just *restored* that mosque during his occupation of Ayodhya.⁴ Sushil Srivastava likewise opines: Mir Baqi might have had the mosque renovated and then re-dedicated it to Babur.⁵

But interesting as these vicissitudes of Islamic iconoclasm in Ayodhya may be, they are immaterial to the fundamental issue: the very fact of Islamic iconoclasm as the cause of the destruction of a Hindu temple on one of the foremost sacred sites of Indias native religion. In a Hindu city, a mosque could not have appeared where a Hindu temple stood without the forcible replacement of that temple, no matter what the exact year was in which the replacement happened. The basic and pertinent fact of history is that first there was a Hindu temple at the site (at least until the Ghorid invasion of 1192) and later a mosque was built in forcible replacement of the temple (at least from 1528 onwards).

The outline of the relevant historical events is quite wellknown, but then the controversy is not about history. This is not merely the now dominant position among Indias secularists who, knowing fully well that they cant win the debate on history, try to shift their ground towards redefining the conflict as a strictly judicial property dispute. It is also the view of the Muslim and Hindu claimants.

According to anti-temple author Sushil Srivastava, the local Muslims believe that Emperor Babur came to Ayodhya in 1528 and destroyed the famous Ram Janmabhoomi temple, to propitiate Pir Fazal Abbas Musa Aashikan, an allegedly fanatical Muslim saint.⁶ Muslim claimants have only started challenging the established consensus about the iconoclastic origin of the Babri Masjid when secularist intellectuals taught them the tactical usefulness of that negationist position. Originally they accepted the true history, but differed with other people only in their theologico-juridical conclusions. To them, a mosque is not less legitimate because it was built

in forcible replacement of an idol temple, rather the contrary. They claimed the Babri Masjid because at one point it was a mosque, and regardless of that mosques prehistory, they insist on the principle: once a mosque, always a mosque.

The Hindus who refuse to cede the Rama-Janmabhoomi site to the Muslim and secularist claimants, do so because this is a Hindu sacred site, - not because it was one in Valmikis, Vikramadityas or Babars day, but simply because it is one *right now*. And the problem, the cause of the post-1949 episode of the Ayodhya conflict, is not the fact that some *mujahid* denied them the right to their own sacred site sometime in the Middle Ages, but that Muslim and secularist politicians are denying them that right today.

That Muslims have destroyed thousands of temples would not be an issue today if the Muslims had taken the same conciliatory attitude which the Pope takes vis-A-vis the Native Americans (during his 1992 visit to the site where Columbus landed in 1492, the Pope expressed his heartfelt regrets for the suffering which Christendom inflicted on them), which the Japanese now take vis-A-vis the Koreans, the Germans vis-A-vis the Jews, etc. Or they may dispense with the fashionable breast-beating and televised apologies, as long as they dont repeat their medieval behaviour in our own time. The problem is not what Muslims did in the past, but what they do today: Hindus are trying to exercise a right which religious communities everywhere obviously have, viz. to worship at their own sacred site; and Muslims are trying to deny them this self-evident right - *not in the middle Ages, but today*.

9.3. The role of foreign scholars

There never was a Rama-Janmabhoomi problem, only a Babri Masjid problem. That Hindus want to build a temple at their own sacred site is the most normal and natural thing in the world. By contrast, it is a most astonishing circumstance that some Muslims lay claim to this Hindu sacred site and try to occupy it. But this arrogant and self-righteous Muslim behaviour is only the effect of indoctrination in Islamic theology. The most abnormal and unnatural thing is the complete support which this Islamic communal aggression has received from world opinion.

Foreign scholars might have played the role which the Supreme Court judges rejected: that of independent arbitrators. But as it turned out, the established Western academics, to the extent that they cared to look into the Ayodhya debate at all, have only looked through the glasses which the Indias Marxist-Muslim combine has put on their noses.

Writing on the Ayodhya controversy, the American India watcher Susan Bayly describes how Hindu activists claim that the scientifically verifiable facts of history justify their cause. Against this tendency, she sees a pressing need for more academics to join those in India who have been brave enough to contest these views.⁷ The claims made here explicitly or implicitly are the following five:

- 1) Hindu activists claim that facts of history justify their cause, viz. the official recognition of the Hindu status (effective since December 22, 1949) of the disputed RamaJanmabhoomi Babri Masjid site at Ayodhya, and its materialization in a scripturally appropriate Rama temple at the site.
- 2) These facts of history are scientifically verifiable, at least according to the said Hindu activists, though Baylys quote marks insinuate that the Hindus use the term scientific improperly.
- 3) Some Indians, academics and others, are contesting these views, viz. the view that the Hindu claim is justified by history, and the view that this reference to history is scientifically verifiable.
- 4) For these Indians, it requires bravery to contest the Hindu activist claims.
- 5) Western academics should urgently join these brave Indians in their rejection of the Hindu activist position.

The first claim is incorrect, for the Hindu claim to the disputed site in Ayodhya was not originally based on history, but on the actual present-day status of the site as a Hindu sacred site. The need for historical justification only arose in 1989, four decades after Hindus had staked their claim, when the opponents of the temple started challenging the existing consensus

regarding the history of the site, viz. that a medieval Hindu temple had been razed by Muslims to make way for a mosque.

The second claim is obviously uncontroversial: once the pro-temple party accepted the challenge of collecting historical evidence, they were confident that their corpus of evidence would stand up to scientific scrutiny. To an extent, this scrutiny has also taken place, and it has not shaken the temple party's confidence.

The third claim is only correct in the weaker sense, viz. that Indian academics are politically contesting (opposing, protesting against) the Hindu position; not in the stronger sense, viz. that they are scientifically contesting (confronting, attempting to refute) it. With the very partial exception of the foursome of historians who represented the Babri Masjid Action Committee during the Government-sponsored scholars debate, Indian academics have most definitely not confronted the case made by the pro-temple scholars.

On the contrary, they have fully used their power in the media, academic and publishing sectors to muzzle the protetemple voices and keep the pro-temple evidence out of public view, rather than face it and possibly refute it. When confronted with inconvenient new evidence dug up by their opponents, the knee-jerk reaction of the secularist scholars and media was to allege concoctions, fabrications and Goebbelsian lies at the top of their voices, and foreign scholars have sheepishly followed their lead.

The fourth claim is simply untrue: it did not require bravery to oppose the pro-temple party from academic platforms, certainly much less than to defend the pro-temple position. There is no physical risk involved in publishing a paper denouncing the Hindu claims on Ayodhya.⁸ To be sure, every now and then a secularist scholar claims to have received death threats from people venting their impotent anger, and the newspapers devote plenty of attention to these non-events all while downplaying the real killing of Hindus in Kashmir or the Northeast.⁹ But being no stranger to hate mail and death threats myself, I know that someone who cares to send you advance warning is not very serious about murdering you. So, at the time of writing, Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma, S. Gopal and all those

other would-be martyrs for free speech are alive and well (like myself, thank you).

The physical danger in writing against the temple is imaginary; by contrast, it is dangerous to uphold rather than oppose Hindu activist positions. It is a fact that throughout the 1990s, many office-bearers of the RSS, the BJP and their Tamil affiliate Hindu Munnani have been murdered; but that was more because of the demolition and other political matters than because of any statements on the historical background of the Hindu claims on Ayodhya. At one point, the publishinghouse *Voice of India*, which has published the Vishva Hindu Parishads statement and several other writings on the Ayodhya evidence, has had to seek police protection for a few days, but the threats had to do with insults to the Prophet and not with the Ayodhya evidence. The riotous and triggerhappy types are not the ones who attach great importance to feats of scholarship.

In terms of status and career, a non-conformistic stance in favour of the temple cannot be maintained without sacrifice. By contrast, joining the anti-temple party has always been a smart career move. Far from requiring bravery, posturing as a committed secularist up in arms against obscurantist and communalist history manipulation will only earn you praise (as Dr. Baylys own appreciation of this bravery illustrates). Indias secularist academics and journalists form a society of mutual praise, and the cheapest way of getting applause in elite India is to attack the Hindu movement.

Dr. Baylys fifth claim, about the urgent need for Western support, is equally untenable. There is no need at all for Western scholars to *come out* in support of their Indian colleagues who oppose the pro-temple position. The reason is that they are already in the same camp: not a single Western academic has come out in support of the Hindu (i.e. the pre-1989 consensus) position. Foreign academicians in overwhelming majority borrow the views of the secularist establishment in the Indian universities, so there is no need for them to join their Indian colleagues.

Now, which is bravest: to take the position promulgated by the government, the parliamentary majority, the media and the capitalist media barons, most political parties, the academic establishment and the

international Indological and India-watching community; or to stand alone against this power bloc?¹⁰

In the footsteps of the Indian academics, their Western colleagues writing on Ayodhya pretend to discuss a conflict but do not care to find out the position of one of the parties. Somehow they manage to collect a lot of data and write lengthy papers without noticing that one half of the controversial contents is missing, and that they are merely rewording the position of one of the two warring parties; though I am sure that they would never accept a student's thesis on any given controversy which reported only one side's version. Future books on the affair will include a chapter on the Ayodhya scandal: the unscrupled use of academic and media power positions by India's secularists to suppress relevant evidence, and the gullibility of foreign scholars relying on hearsay from Indian colleagues whose bona fides is open to question.

Many outsiders still believe that the VHP case is based on myth and concoction, as the BMAC and its Marxist supporters have kept on alleging.¹¹ At the very best, many people, including sincere but uninformed scholars, assume a priory that the truth must lie somewhere in between, and that both sides are just equally unreliable hot-heads. Foreign press correspondents have simply parroted the views of the Marxist historians of JNU and AMU in support of the Babri Masjid cause, as well as their silence about the scholars' debate. Thus, in his review of the eminent historians' book *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, former *Time* correspondent Edward Desmond adopts the Marxist historians' contentions lock, stock and barrel.¹²

As a writer of lengthy pieces on Kashmir in which the 1990 ethnic cleansing of the Hindus goes unmentioned, Desmond does not surprise us by concealing the government sponsored debate with its embarrassing outcome nor by deliberately denying the existence of evidence put at his disposal by Voice of India: in his lengthy article on the affair, he curtly dismisses all the pro-temple evidence as bogus without presenting any part of it, a position he would never be able to defend in a public debate. His strength is, of course, that he does not have to fear any public debate: the other side simply cannot get its message across through the media, so the public assumes that this is a subject on which the debate is closed.

Even the French sociologist Gérard Heuzie, who has written some fresh and independent observations on the Hindutva movement, has not been able to get around the secularist monopoly on the information flow on Ayodhya. He has analysed the anti-democratic musings which were audible in the discourse of secularism when several thousands of karsevaks brutally demolished the Babri Masjid, refusing to listen to RSS cadres, who were acting as the last ramparts of the paternalist perspectives. Numerous comments showed clearly that for the academic and establishment commentators, the most insupportable thing was that uneducated youngsters, without any letters of introduction or written authorisations, had intervened to change the course of things.¹³ Heuzé points out that the way in which the RSS was overwhelmed by a thousand determined youngsters on 6 December 1992 is telling. The sect is worthless in street combat... its manifestations remind us more of the boy scouts than of mass politics.¹⁴

And yet, watch how even a lucid man like Heuze gets trapped. For all his independence, even he proves to be the prisoner of the secularists control of the information flow. Mentioning the historical claims regarding Ayodhya, he declares that Hindus believe only since the 19th century in the forcible replacement of a Rama temple by the Babri Masjid, that there seems never to have been a temple underneath the mosque, and that the Hindu pillars used in the mosque were clearly brought from elsewhere.¹⁵ These claims are not true, and have not emerged from the debate as even plausible.

There is no firm information about the pillars provenance, though the rule is that a mosque systematically incorporated rubble from the very temple which it was replacing. There is ample archaeological evidence that the whole Ramkot hill was covered with a temple complex, as is only to be expected at the geographical place of honour in a temple city. Apart from older but vaguer indications, there are three firm pieces of evidence from the 18th century, apart from the unnamed pre-19th century sources cited as such by the local 19th-century Muslim authors.¹⁶ Moreover, he should have been able to draw the right conclusions from the general context of Islamic iconoclasm, from the fact that the VHP scholars had discovered no less than four attempts by BMAC people to tamper with the evidence, and from the mediacentred and swearword-oriented performance of the proBabri

academics as opposed to the evidence-centred performance of their rather fewer academic opponents.

The point is that, judging from his text and bibliography, Heuze does not know the official VHP argumentation presented during the Government-sponsored debate, nor has he heard of the independent studies supporting the temple thesis. The same ignorance about the solid Hindu argumentation is in evidence in the publications on Indias religious conflict by Susan Bayly (US), Peter van der Veer (Holland), Christophe Jaffrelot (France) and others.¹⁷ They have relied on Indias secularist accounts of the *status quaestionis* of Ayodhya research, and these have quite purposely kept the more serious and convincing formulations of the Hindu position out of the readers view.

Thus, Ali Asghar Engineer writes on the cover of his *Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy*. Future generations will have a right to know what the controversy was about¹⁸, but then takes care to include only a few token statements for the Hindu side which are either on peripheral aspects of the debate or belong to the clumsier variety of Hindutva polemic; he repeats the same exercise in his sequel *Politics of Confrontation*.¹⁹ To comment on such manipulation, I need only repeat Engineers own words on the same cover: It is not- only violence which has to be condemned but also distortion of history and intellectual dishonesty.

The Dutch Indologist Peter Van der Veer profusely quotes from the contributors to S. Gopals and A.A. Engineers books. Even the bibliography (of a book published in 1994) does not mention a single book presenting any aspect of the protemple argument (all of which were available before 1993). However, in his own earlier research on the traditions concerning Ayodhya, he had endorsed the old consensus view. This earned him a lot of criticism, e.g.: Disconcertingly, Van der Veer does not query Babur's destruction of the temple.²⁰

Even in his book *Religious Nationalism*, Van der Veer does not follow the secularists all the way. He actually quotes pro-temple archaeologist Dr. S.P. Gupta, albeit only in a footnote; and not some clumsy statement but an actual piece of refutation of Babri historian Prof. R.S. Sharmas claims: Mr.

Sharma has not given a single piece of archaeological or historical evidence in support of what he says. The archaeological and other evidence from art history indicate that there was a Brahminical temple at the place where the mosque stands today. The iconographical features like vanamala and karandmukut show that it was probably a Vaishnava temple.²¹ Prof. A.R. Khan, who opposed the VHP plans for Ayodhya yet upheld true history by confirming the preexistence of a temple at the site, is also mentioned in footnote by Van der Veer but his arguments are not given.²²

However, it is clear that after being taken to task for providing ammunition to the pro-temple argumentation, the Dutch scholar developed cold feet, hence his climb down: In research carried out in the 1970s both Bakker and I relied heavily on the local tradition that Babars general had destroyed a temple built on Ramas birthplace. This tradition is supposedly corroborated by the fact that in the mosque are pillars of a temple (which Bakker ascribes to the eleventh century). The same kind of pillars are also used in the grave of a Muslim pir who is in the local tradition considered to have been instrumental in the demolition of the temple. (...) While Bakker and I could naively accept local tradition, this cannot be done any longer. For example, one could argue that the fact that there are temple pillars in the mosque does not tell you much. They could have been taken from anywhere and not from a demolished Rama temple.²³

So this is the evidence given, the *whole* reason for abandoning a well-researched view of history: One could argue... It is in the nature of historical evidence (as opposed to evidence in physics) that it can always be argued, that is, explained away if inconvenient. Fossiles disprove the Biblical Creation Theory? No, for *one could argue* (and some Evangelical fundamentalists do argue) that God created the world with fossils and all, if only to put the faith of palaeontologists to the test- Of even the hardest evidence *one could argue* that it may have been planted, doctored, misplaced, and that it should therefore be rejected by historians.

Fact is that Bakker and Van der Veer, during their original and extensive research, have not come across any fact which casts doubt on the temple demolition scenario. Fact is also that Van der Veer (and likewise Bakker) can still not cite a single *finding* which casts such doubt now. All he has to

show as justification for his climb down is that one could argue that the probable things did not happen, and that, though there is no evidence for it, something improbable *might* have happened.

His critic Antony Copley goes all the way in parroting his Indian contact persons: Myth rather than history has fuelled Hindu fundamentalist protest over Ayodhya. (...) Archaeologists question there being any urban site at Ayodhya at the alleged date of Ramas birth, and find no evidence of any temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque.²⁴ One wonders to what archaeological finding he may be referring, for the two latest diggings, by B. B. Lal in the late 1970s and by Y.D. Sharma in 1992, *have* yielded remains of a temple.

To zoom in on a telling detail, Copley makes two claims which are readily refuted by Father Tieffenthalers 1767 evidence, which had figured prominently during the Ayodhya debate, but which has not come to Copleys notice because the Indian historians on whom he relies have done their utmost to keep this evidence out of view. He claims that in the last decades of Nawabi rule (in Oudh), Muslims claimed that Hanuman Garhi was built on a mosque, and "to appease Muslim feeling [the Nawahl gave permission for a new mosque to be built near the Hanuman temple. This inspired the Hindu counter-claim that the Babri Masjid mosque was built on the site of a former temple, the Ram Janmabhoomi. Further, Copley alleges that the *chabootra* had been illegally constructed near the mosque in 1857.²⁵ Both claims are explicitly refuted by Tieffenthalers testimony: he saw the *chabootra* in 1767, and he reports the Hindu claim that the Masjid had forcibly replaced a Rama temple.

Of course, Copley supports the secularist thesis that it was all a British concoction: But the British, convinced that the Muslims lay behind the rebellion of 1857, (...) saw fit to feed this mythology. Much is made by secular-minded historians of both this official literature and Miss Beveridges introduction to her translation of Babars memoirs, where she accused Babar of just this act of vandalism. That there was a temple to mark Ramas birthplace and that the entire Ayodhya complex could be seen as commemorative of his birth suggests the irrationality of this claim.²⁶

But there is plenty of pre-British testimony, which is why even after his climbdown, Peter van der Veer maintains: The suggestion that the local tradition is entirely invented by the British thus seems disingenuous.²⁷ The facile claim of a British concoction also flies in the face of the known fact that the British, while fostering disunity among the Indians at the political level, made great efforts to prevent communal clashes in the streets. Further, if the British had wanted to use temple demolition stories for fomenting communal friction, they could have pointed to numerous indubitable instances rather than having to invent one.

A scrutiny of the available historical material clearly shows that the truth does not lie halfway between the recent politicized hypothesis and the centuries-old consensus, and that the former is not half right, nor the latter half wrong. By all standards of historical method, the case for the thesis that the Babri Masjid has replaced a pre-existent Hindu temple is strong, if not overwhelming. It should be accepted unless and until evidence to the contrary is produced - and that is precisely what the BMAC experts have failed to do when the Government of India provided them with an official forum for doing so.

That the international media without exception and even most academics have chosen the side of the Muslim aggressor and condemned the Hindus who were merely minding their own business at their own sacred site, is the eighth wonder of the world; but it becomes perfectly understandable when we realise that they merely act upon the information given them by Indias secularists. Like their source, they have blacked out the Hindu version on Ayodhya and completely identified with the Muslim version. Future scholars of political and communications science will study the reporting on the Ayodhya affair as an absolute classic of successful disinformation.

9.4. Misrepresenting the Ayodhya issue

Neither the real probability that Rama was effectively born right there, nor the solid evidence that a temple was destroyed to make way for a mosque, are what should decide this controversy. After all, the call for historical proof was only launched by Indias secularists spoiling for a fight, as a dispersionary tactic. To be sure, I dont want to follow the Babri Masjid Action Committee historians in replacing factual argument with rhetoric

consisting of the attributing of ulterior motives to opponents. The weakness of their argumentative position has to be demonstrated in its own right, as has already been done.²⁸ They themselves have not contributed any evidence to the search for the historical true story, they were actually demanding from the Hindu side what they themselves never provided, - indeed, never intended to provide. In the process, their ulterior motives have come to light in sufficient measure to warrant some comment.

The aim of the pro-Babri Masjid historians was never to settle any historical questions. If it had been, then they would not have opposed the VHPs request to organize systematic excavations at the site; nor would they have concealed the pro-temple evidence in their publications. Their aim was merely to distract public attention from the obvious and extremely simple solution of this controversy. The fact that this solution would be in favour of the Hindu claims was apparently unbearable to them because of their seething hatred of their ancestral religion.

The solution to the Ayodhya tangle lies in the universal ethical principle known as the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would be done to by them. Since Muslims would not like their own sacred sites to be occupied by members of another religion, they should not claim anyone else's sacred site for themselves.

This means in practice that they should give up every attempt to wrest the site from its rightful owner, Hindu society. This includes street agitation, political lobbying inside and outside Parliament, and also the judicial proceedings. The attempt to occupy another religion's sacred site is morally wrong, and it is not made one per cent less wrong by circumstances which seem to bring the achievement of the reprehensible goal within reach. It is not made less reprehensible by political equations which have allowed Islamic activists to score some points (e.g. the Places of Worship Act which freezes the status of places of worship as on 15 August 1947). Nor by the media bias which confers guilt on the Hindus for the riots which Muslims have started in pursuance of their political goals (such as the Muslim attacks on Hindu lives and property all over India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Great Britain after 6 December 1992), and thereby gives Muslim rioters ample reward for their aggression.

The incredibly arrogant Muslim attempt to take over a Hindu sacred site is not even justified by the legal sanction to the injustices of history which has been created by the British and Nehruvian juridical statusquo-ism regarding the accomplished facts of Islamic iconoclasm, and which may have given the Muslims a judicial leg to stand upon. Pressing the Islamic claim on a Hindu sacred site is morally outrageous, whether in the streets, in parliament or in court; whether using Molotov cocktails, petrodollar bribes, or juridical residues of jihadic accomplished facts. The only just, honourable and workable solution is that Muslims simply withdraw their outrageous claim, preferably with apologies for the damage in lives and political stability which their Babri Masjid agitation has already caused.

Some Muslims have understood the unreasonableness of the Islamic claim to Rama-Janmabhoomi. When Chandra Shekhar was Prime Minister, in December 1990, even his friend Syed Shahabuddin wrote that for once, Muslims would be ready to gift away the Babri Masjid site: The law protects the Babri Masjid even if it was constructed on the site of a temple after demolishing it, but in the interest of communal amity, as a one-time exception, the Muslim community is willing to make the offer, as a moral gesture, in accordance with the Shariat.²⁹ The Dutch scholar Paul Teunissen, in a review of my own book *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid*, takes me to task for putting Islamic fanatics and secularists in the same bag, and declares that Syed Shahabuddin cannot possibly be a fanatic, considering that he has promised to demolish the Babri Masjid with his own hands if proof is furnished that it was built on a temple.³⁰

After the demolition, several more Muslim leaders have come forward with proposals to abandon the claim to Ayodhya, notably Maulana Wahiduddin Khan and Asghar Ali Engineer. This raises the issue of a possible settlement with the Muslims, and the terms in which such a settlement should be formulated. But note that no secularist opinion leader in India nor any Western observer has highlighted these offers, let alone given them his explicit support. Their preference is with the most obscurantist and militant tendency in the Muslim community.

The basis for a settlement must be a correct appreciation of the Ayodhya situation. The site belongs to the Hindus, and the fact of its historical

Muslim occupation, now already a distant memory, has not altered that. The ancient Hindu status of the site, strengthened moreover by its restored Hindu status since 1949, implies that Muslims are in no position to gift away what isn't theirs in the first place. Muslim postures of generosity and sacrifice for the common good still carry an implied claim that for now at least, the site is theirs; it isn't. Similarly, the assertion that by exercising their right to their own sacred site, Hindus are exacting revenge or demanding compensation for Islamic misdeeds of the past, still implies that the site is now the Muslims property, and that Hindus want to take it back or receive it back.

Revenge would mean that Hindus kill as many Muslims as the number of Hindus killed by Muslims (in absolute figures, or perhaps in relative proportion, taking into account todays higher population levels?), which would require a good number of Hiroshima-size nuclear bombs; also, thousands of functioning mosques, including those at the sacred sites of Islam in Central Asia, would have to be destroyed. It is no Hindus case that Muslims should be subjected to this kind of treatment, and Ayodhya simply has nothing to do with it.³¹

Restoration is out of the question too: the contemporary Indian Muslims do not have the power to restore the millions of Hindu victims back to life, nor to bring back the millions deported as slaves, nor to resurrect the numerous treasures of civilisation which their ancestors destroyed. They may of course try to win back for Hinduism the lost territories now known as Afghanistan, the Maldives, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Southeast Asia; and they are welcome to form a special regiment and take Pak-Occupied Kashmir back into India, - that would be a very incomplete but nonetheless meritorious restoration.

Compensation is what the Hindu upper castes are asked to do towards the Hindu lower castes, in the form of job reservations. In their supreme arrogance, some Muslim leaders are now demanding that Muslims be included in the category of backwards to whom the forward castes are expected to give favourable treatment in compensation of past injustices; at the same time, they angrily reject any suggestion that they (like upper-caste Hindus) could be held accountable for the so-called misdeeds of their

ancestors. If compensation is needed in Hindu-Muslim relations, a start should be made with job reservations for the oppressed and dwindling Hindu minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh: let the bullies make amends to their victims. In the case of the destroyed temples, compensation would mean that the estimated contemporary value of all the buildings and art treasures victimised by Islamic iconoclasm is paid back to Hindu trusts, in the form of a mega-billion sum of petrodollars earmarked for public works in the sphere of Hindu civilisation. The signs are that such compensation is not on the cards. No Hindu organisation connected with the Ram-Janmabhoomi controversy has formulated its wishes in those terms.

Let us not get sidetracked by the numerous semantic manipulations with which Indias secularists are trying to blur this issue. Muslims are not the objects of revenge, they are not asked to compensate anything, not even to restore anything. All they should do, is to abandon their claim to what is not theirs: a Hindu sacred site. To put it even more briefly, all they should do is *nothing*, except to get on with their lives. To Wahiduddin Khan and others who attach strings to their offer of leaving the disputed site to the Hindus, it should be clear that Muslims are not in a position to expect any kind of reward for this long-overdue step. There is, however, one reward which they would certainly be getting: a positive feeling among Hindus, who have never overlooked the fact that Muslims are human beings like the rest of us.

Meanwhile, the prospect of Muslims gifting away the Ram-Janmabhoomi site remains academical. The Government of India could of course have chosen to promote these conciliatory Muslim leaders (who are still militant enough)³² as acknowledged representatives of their community. But it preferred to cultivate fanatics like the recently deceased Ali Mian, director of a theological academy which doubles as a sanctuary for Pakistani spies, on the assumption that they have more of a following among the mass of Muslim voters. At the time of writing, the focus of the ongoing war of Islam against India has shifted to other arenas (Kashmir, reservations for Muslims, Urdu), but there is as yet no reason to believe that the Ayodhya normalisation process will be completed in a peaceful manner anytime soon.³³ Let it be clear that that is not the Hindus fault: they should

not bear any cross on their chests for minding their own business at their own sacred site.

9.5. Ramas birthplace: a matter of faith?

The terms of the Ayodhya debate have often been blurred, sometimes deliberately and mischievously, sometimes out of intellectual incompetence or sloppiness. Both types converge in the affirmation that the Hindu claim to Ayodhya is a matter of faith. Anti-temple polemicists have blurred the matter further by pretending that the pro-temple spokesmen who clumsily described the question of Ramas birthplace as a matter of faith, had also tried to reduce the plainly historical and archaeological question of medieval temple demolition to a matter of faith, which they have not. Let us now at any rate focus on the belief concerning Ramas birth.

Some RSS leaders have repeatedly claimed that the Rama-Janmabhoomi site should be left to the Hindus out of respect for the faith of the Hindu masses in the tradition that Rama was born at that very site. Even the noted historian Prof. K.S. Lal has gleefully been quoted by JNU historian Prof. K.N. Panikkar as declaring: In religion, it is a matter of faith and not of proof... So by faith alone Christians embrace Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, by faith and faith alone Muslims believe Muhammad to be the Prophet of Allah, and by faith and faith alone Hindus believe Ram-Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya to be the birthplace of Lord Rama.³⁴ This presentation of the Hindu claim to Ayodhya as being a matter of faith is inaccurate and unnecessarily weakens the Hindu position.

For one thing, the status of the enumerated items of faith is different. Christianity stands or falls with the belief that Jesus was Gods Only-Begotten Son. Islam stands or falls with the belief that Mohammed is Allahs Prophet. But Hinduism (and within Hinduism even the particular tradition of Rama worship) does not in any way depend on the belief that Rama was born at that or another site, just as Christianity and Islam are not really dependent on their respective claims to specific pilgrimage sites.³⁵

However, it just so happens that the Mohammed whom we talk about when formulating the dogmas of Islam, according to those very texts in which his career is described and given a Prophetic interpretation, was a

man from Mecca in Arabia, brought up in the respect for the Pagan Arab sanctuary there, the Kaaba; there is no other Prophet Mohammed than the Mohammed from Mecca.³⁶ Similarly, it so happens that Rama, according to the texts describing his career and glorifying him, was a member of the Ikshvaku dynasty ruling in Ayodhya; there is no other Rama than the Rama from Ayodhya. The agreement among all those concerned that Mohammed was born in Mecca and Rama in Ayodhya may have certain ritual consequences, but is by no means the defining dogma of the respective religions embodied in Mohammed and Rama.

The second fundamental objection to the formulation of the Hindu position regarding Ayodhya in terms of faith, is that the term faith is not respectable among post-Enlightenment intellectuals, much less among Indias secularists. It has a connotation of irrational attachment to unproven and even absurd claims. Thus, by faith alone Christians embrace Jesus Christ to be the Son of God: that is an accurate description of an irrational behaviour. The notion that a human being, a creature, can be the Creators only-begotten son, is quite absurd. To believe it, is irrational, is an injustice to mans status as a creature equipped with the faculty of Reason. The defiantly anti-rational position of the Christian faith was summed up by the Church Father Tertullian: *Credo quia absurdum*, I believe it because it is absurd.

Similarly, by faith and faith alone Muslims believe Muhammad to be the Prophet of Allah: that is an accurate description of an irrational belief, seen for what it was by Mohammeds Pagan contemporaries. They dismissed his revelations as hallucinations, poetic inventions or fits of demonic possession. It is simply not true that Mohammed heard the voice of the archangel Gabriel, nor that the text he received was a special message from God. Everything in the Quran can perfectly be explained from the psychology and the cultural and social circumstances of the Meccan trader Mohammed.³⁷ No fact in and about the Quran makes it intellectually necessary for a rational reader to think up the intervention of an outside and superhuman being, be it Gabriel or Allah. It is only by faith that one can accept the irrational claim which is the basic tenet of Islam, viz. that Mohammed received a special message from the Almighty.

By contrast, it is simply not true that by faith and faith alone Hindus believe Rama-Janmabhumi in Ayodhya to be the birthplace of Rama. In common with the Muslim reverence for the Kaaba, the Hindu reverence for the Rama-Janmabhoomi site is a *ritual convention*, a category which may or may not have a basis in history. In the case of the Kaaba, the convention is demonstrably based on a deliberately concocted myth. The case of Ayodhya is altogether different.

Is it by faith alone that we believe Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo? Of course, we have no eye-witnesses, and even if we had, we could not be sure that they weren't lying to us. It is, in a sense, an act of faith (underlying all reliance on man-made historical evidence) to assume that the wealth of documentary material mentioning Napoleon and directly or indirectly confirming the traditional belief that he was defeated at Waterloo, is trustworthy. However, the scholarly discipline of historical method has developed ways of discerning trustworthy from untrustworthy sources, so that it can raise the mere possibility that the traditional claims of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo are true, to a degree of probability bordering on certainty. This is not the absolute certainty of faith, but a rational form of knowledge which always remains open to correction, and which is merely the best and most practical instrument with which we can face the historical dimension of reality.

We have fewer sources about Rama than about Napoleon, but essentially the situation is the same: while we have no direct evidence in the form of eye-witnesses, we do have documentary sources giving particular information about his career. The tradition that Rama was born in Ayodhya, even on that very site, may well be historical. It is supported by a fairly consistent Epic and Puranic tradition, a type of source spurned by 19th-century Orientalists, and still ridiculed by westernized Indian scholars who are not up-to-date with developments abroad, where it has been rehabilitated. The core of the Greek story of Troy, the Biblical histories of the Israelite kings and the Chinese records of the Shang dynasty were once dismissed by scholars as obviously unhistorical, but are now accepted as remarkably accurate or at least as having a core of historical truth. It is only in India that people are still ignoring their own ancient historical tradition,

and keep on treating some haughtily prejudiced 19th-century speculations as Gospel truth.

By Puranic chronology, Rama lived in a pre-Harappan age which has left few durable buildings, so chances are slim that anything about him could ever be archaeologically verified or falsified. Unlike the fictional traditions conferring sanctity on the Muslim and Christian pilgrimage sites in Mecca, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the historicity of the Ayodhya tradition remains an undisproven possibility. The geographical prominence of the site, coupled with the consistent Epic and Puranic tradition that the Suryavamsa (solar) dynasty (including Rama) ruled in Ayodhya, add to the probability of the conventional assumption that that very site once carried Ramas castle.

JNU historian Romila Thapar, a leading militant of the Babri Masjid cause, has claimed in an interview with *Le Monde* that the real question is not whether a mosque had forcibly replaced a temple, but whether Rama had lived at that site in the first place.³⁸ We notice the strategic retreat from a question on which hard proof is readily available, and where she knows her side has lost the battle, to a question buried in the deep past which is probably beyond verification. Her position that the historicity of the tradition underlying the sacred status of the site is what ought to be proven, is an insulting application of double standards: it subjects Hindus to a test which is out of the question with Islam and Christianity, and which these two religions are totally unable to pass.

The fact that a community considers a site sacred in the present is sufficient reason for respecting it as such, regardless of history. The Israeli government is protecting Christian access to the places where Christians claim that Jesus was born, crucified and buried. This correct policy is not altered just because modern research has shown these claims to be unfounded.³⁹ Two of these sites originally had Pagan temples on them, which the Church destroyed. The Church's claim on the supposed site of Jesus crucifixion was based on a dream in which Jesus himself revealed the location to the Emperor Constantine's Christian mother. One imagines the scornful secularist reaction if the Vishva Hindu Parishad had based its Ayodhya claims on a dream; yet, the numerous Christians in India

secularist coalition have not made any plans to relinquish the Church's dream-based claims on the pilgrimage sites in Palestine.

Similarly, the Islamic claims on the Kaaba in Mecca and on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem are completely unhistorical and are based on transparent *ad hoc* myths. In this case, we know the circumstances of the myths deliberate creation with even more exactitude, from the Islamic sources themselves. Prophet Mohammed abandoned his fad of imitating Jewish tradition, including the choice of Jerusalem as the direction of prayer, when the Jews proved to be unimpressed with his claims to prophethood. Therefore he stole Abraham, the presumed founder of the monotheistic tradition which he had adopted, from the Jews, and declared that the Arabs were Abrahams true heirs through Ishmael. The logic of this mythical construction forced him to claim that the Arab national sanctuary at Mecca had been built by Abraham. The fact that it had been in use as a temple of Hubal and other Arab Gods and Goddesses since time immemorial, was explained away by the totally unhistorical speculation that the idolaters had at one time usurped the temple which originally belonged to Abraham and his religion.

In reality, no pre-Islamic Arab text or inscription mentions Abraham, his religion, or his son Ishmael. Conversely, the Bible, the only authentic source on Abraham, never makes him go anywhere near Mecca, nor does it make him build the Kaaba. These two inconvenient facts are explained away by means of a conspiracy theory: the Jews censored their own Scripture and destroyed the existing references to the future prophet Mohammed, and the Pagan Arabs must have done likewise with their inscriptions and oral tradition. The truth of the matter is that Mohammed stole the Kaaba from its rightful owners, who had never practised any Abrahamic or Islamic worship there. Yet, because the Islamic use of the Kaaba is now a long-standing ritual convention, it is respected as such without any question.

The Islamic claim to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is even more transparently fraudulent. Prophet Mohammed is supposed to have used it as a landing platform on his night journey through heaven on a winged horse. Any secularist willing to uphold this claim as historical? Or

otherwise ready to show the courage of his conviction and demand that the Muslims relinquish their claim to the Temple Mount so as to be morally in a position to demand a similar abandonment of , mythical claims from the Hindus? Most Jews believe that it is up to the Messiah to rebuild King Solomons temple on its original site, so they are in no hurry to make the Muslims hand it back. That saves the Israeli government a dilemma: for apart from respecting Jewish sensibilities, it is also committed to the principle that sacred sites, including Islamic ones, are to be respected irrespective of the validity of the claims underlying that status of sacredness.⁴⁰

No secularist is brandishing the mythical nature of these Islamic claims in support of a demand to hand the Temple Mount back to the Jews, nor to seize it and declare it a secular national monument. In the case of Christians and Muslims, no one demands that they prove the historicity of the stories underlying the sacred status of their places of pilgrimage. Demanding the same of Hindus is an insulting display of double standards, a candid statement that one intends to treat Hindus as dirt.

But for the sake of argument, let us assume that the real question concerns Ramas historical birthplace. There are two competing answers to that question. One is the traditional answer, based on a corpus of traditional literature. The other is Romila Thapars not very precise answer, which is essentially ready to let Rama come into this world at any site except at the traditional one. That traditional location may be hard to prove, but there is even less proof for any alternative location. The traditional location has at least documentary evidence in its favour, viz. the tradition itself. Romila Thapars alternative, by contrast, is only backed by her own eagerness to put Hindus in the wrong.

To be sure, it remains possible that the tradition is mistaken, but the point for an objective scholar is that Romila Thapar has not given one iota of evidence for that scenario. In her overview of the development of different Ramayana versions, she mentions a lot of differences (relationship between Rama and Sita, Janaka and Sita, status of Ravana, of Hanuman) but no two different birthsites.⁴¹

It was left to the Babri Masjid Action Committee office-bearers to claim, on the basis of a collection of articles by various modern crank writers, that they had proof of Ramas birth at no less than seven different places (from Andhra Pradesh and Varanasi via Nepal and Afghanistan all the way to Egypt), apart from having cited proof that Rama had never existed at all.⁴² To stay within their logic, I suggest that someone who has taken birth at seven different places was certainly able to take birth at yet one more place, viz. that hilltop in Ayodhya.

At any rate, the BMACs frontal display of contempt for logic and rational method has not pitted any secularist against the BMAC position. For them no allegations of replacing historical knowledge with myth or faith; which adds further illustration to our view that the whole rhetoric of *historicity vs. faith* was never anything else than a dispersionary tactic to put the Hindus on the defensive. Albeit one in which some Hindu spokesmen were unwitting accomplices by their own mindless adoption of the term faith.

9.6. A Babri Masjid, not a Rama-Janmabhoomi problem

Though the Supreme Court judgment was correct in its effective decision, the commentatorial parts of the verdict come in for some serious criticism. This is especially true of its allotment of guilt. The bias showing from these passages should warn against the optimism with which some Hindu commentators have welcomed the verdict.

I suppose I am not the first to notice the glaring contradiction between the following two statements made by the eminent judges in two successive paragraphs. In Para 56, Hindu society is explicitly dissociated from the guilt of the demolition on 6 December 1992: The miscreants who demolished the mosque had no religion, caste or creed except the character of a criminal and the mere incident of birth of such a person in any particular community cannot attach the stigma of his crime to the community in which he was born.⁴³

This clear position is reversed in the very next Paragraph, n° 57: ...However, confining exercise of the right of worship of the Hindu community to its reduced form within the disputed area as on 7th January

1993, lesser than that exercised till the demolition on 6th December 1992, by the freeze enacted in Section 7(2) appears to be reasonable and just in view of the fact that the miscreants who demolished the mosque are suspected to be persons professing to practice the Hindu religion. The Hindu community must, therefore, bear the cross on its chest, for the misdeed of the miscreants reasonably suspected to belong to their religious fold.⁴⁴

Remark first of all the Christian imagery in the last sentence: The Hindu community must bear the cross on its chest. This illustrates what we had suspected all along: the English-speaking elite in India has preserved the mind-set of the Christian-British colonial rulers. The ruling class has borrowed its religious imagery from Western Christianity, just as it has borrowed its secularism from the anti-religious reaction in the late-Christian West. Mentally, India is to an extent still under *Brown Sahib* colonial domination, and the legal apparatus which denies Hindus the right to their sacred site can, in circumstances critical to the establishments legitimacy, still be used as an instrument of colonial oppression.

Within this anti-native, anti-Hindu colonial system, it is the latter (n0 57) of the two mutually contradictory statements which represents the true spirit: Hindu society is guilty of trying to manage its own affairs at its own sacred site, so it deserves to be punished with administrative restrictions on its access to the Rama-Janmabhoomi, and perhaps with further judicial restrictions later. The judges simply confirm what is explicitly laid down in article 30 of the Constitution: minorities enjoy privileges which are denied to Hindus, including the non-interference by the government in the affairs of their places of worship. Hindus have no right to complain when the government takes over Hindu temples, nor when it works hand-in-glove with Islamic activists trying to take over a Hindu sacred site. They should be satisfied with the status of second-class citizens, to which they have been so well accustomed by centuries of colonial rule, Islamic as well as Christian.

The former of the two statements (n0 56), by contrast, is quite dishonest. It is just a typical exercise in the mendacious secularspeak of the Nehruvian elite: claiming that the religions are not themselves responsible for

communal strife, that it is the handiwork of evil political opportunists and miscreants. In reality, Islam is directly responsible for the communal conflict as a whole; and a group of committed Hindus are responsible for the demolition of the Babri Masjid. It is simply not true that the demolishers of the Babri Masjid had no religion, caste or creed except the character of a criminal.

Though not all Hindus agreed on this type of strategy for achieving the reconstruction of a proper temple at the site, it is undeniable that the demolishers acted out of a commitment to Hindu concerns. They certainly belonged to a Hindu caste (say, Maratha) or a Hindu sect (say, Naga sadhu) and professed the Hindu religion. Of course the stigma of their intervention does not attach to the whole of Hindu society, but nevertheless every Hindu is entitled to feel some pride that our boys have stood up for Hindu dignity on 6 December 1992. They did what many BJP supporters in their heart of hearts had wanted to do but were too afraid or too politically domesticated to put into practice.

It is sad that such a symbolic event like the demolition of the misplaced Babri Masjid architecture had to be performed surreptitiously by an unruly crowd of mostly unemployed youngsters. But then, perhaps it was just their task in these circumstances. Under Indias secularist regime, Hindu society is an underground society, and sometimes it is inevitable that moral imperatives in the service of Hindu society can only be realised by such surreptitious surprise action.

Considering the foolish haughtiness with which the Allahabad High Court had just decided, days before the gathering scheduled for 6 December, to postpone once more their verdict on the acquisition of some of the Ayodhya land by the UP government (intended as part of a strategy towards a peaceful solution), after a full 42 years of endless litigation, it is not fair to accuse the over-enthusiastic Rama devotees of disrespect towards the judicial process and the democratic order which it is supposed to uphold. Rather, they have shown disrespect towards the misuse of the courts for political games, and they have rightly revolted against the judges contempt for Hindu society, which was evident from their unwillingness to settle the dispute brought before them, concerning no less a site than the

Rama-Janmabhoomi.

Footnotes:

¹Sushil Srivastava: *The Disputed Mosque. A Historical Inquiry*, Vistaar Publ., Delhi 1991, p.90. As for the calligraphy of the inscription attributing the building of the mosque to Babars lieutenant Mir Baqi, Srivastava argues (p.89) that it is in a style typical of the 19th century, so that the inscription constitutes but a very weak proof for dating the mosque to Babars reign.

²R. Nath: *The Babri Masjid of Ayodhya, Historical Research Documentation Programme*, Jaipur 1991, p.11.

³About the Babri Masjid in the decades before the Hindu-Muslim clashes in the 1850s, the regions first British district commissioner, Patrick Camegy, wrote: It is said that up to that time the Hindus and Mohamedans alike used to worship in the mosque-temple. Quoted by Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p. 153.

⁴R. Nath: *The Babar Masjid of Ayodhya*, p.38. With 1001-1030, the period of Mahmud Ghaznavis raids is meant.

⁵Sushil Srivastava: *The Disputed Mosque*, p.88.

⁶Sushil Srivastava: *The Disputed Mosque*, p.78.

⁷Susan Bayly: *History and the fundamentalists: India after the Ayodhya crisis*, Bulletin of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, April 1993.

⁸We are not considering here the cases of outright provocation, like the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) Ramayana exhibit, or the disgusting performance of some journalists at the Ayodhya site prior to the demolition, when they were offering cookies to the Kar Sevaks, as if to monkeys in a zoo, in order to verify the rumour that these were just hungry street kids lured to the Kar Seva in exchange for food. Since

these have nothing to do with the historical debate on Ayodhya, we understand that they are not included in Susan Baylys paean to bravery of anti-temple Indians. Against the said provocations, some Hindu activists have lost their temper, but even then, nobody was killed.

⁹*E.g. Soma Wadhwa: Historians rained with hate mail, Sunday Observer, 17-1-1993.*

¹⁰*In 1998, a BJP-led alliance gained a working majority in the Lok Sabha, but many coalition parties refuse to have anything to do with communal issues, and even in the BJP the interest in and commitment to the Ayodhya temple is unimpressive.*

¹¹*This stand is still taken by most contributors to Sarvepalli Gopal ed.: Anatomy of a Confrontation, the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Issue (Penguin, Delhi 1991), which probably contains the final Marxist position in this debate. The book (and the sycophantic reviews it has received) avoids mentioning the pre-British testimonies and carefully ignores the scholars debate as well as other scholarly expositions of the Hindu case.*

¹²*Edward Desmond reviewing S. Gopal, ed.: Anatomy of a Confrontation, in New York Review of Books, 14-5-1992.*

¹³*Gérard Heuzé: Où va l'Inde moderne? LHarmattan, Paris 1993, p.59.*

¹⁴*Gérard Heuzé: Où va l'Inde moderne?, p. 12 2.*

¹⁵*Gérard Heuzé: Où va l'Inde modems?, p.7-8.*

¹⁶*Vide Harsh Narain: Ayodhya Temple-Mosque Dispute, esp. p.18 and p.91 for the Jaipur maharajas Janmasthan map (1717), p.10-11 for Father Tieffenthalers testimony (1767), p.23-26 for the Persian Bahadurshahi Book of Forty Sermons (around 1710).*

[17](#)Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism. Hindus and Muslims in India*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994; Christophe Jaffrelot: *Les Nationalistes Hindous*, Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris 1993; Susan Bayly: *History and the Fundamentalists: India after the Ayodhya Crisis*, Bulletin of the Academy of arts and Sciences, April 1993.

[18](#)Published by Ajanta Publ., Delhi 1990.

[19](#)Published by Ajanta Publ., Delhi 1990 c.q. 1992.

[20](#)Antony Copley: *Secularism Reconsidered, Contemporary South Asia* 1993, 2 (1), p.47-65, spec. p.64 n.38.

[21](#)Quoted by Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p.219, n.55.

[22](#)Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p.218 n.51. A.R. Khans rebuttal to the JNU historians, *In the name of history*, along with the ensuing polemic, has been included in S. R. Goel, ed.: *Hindu Temples*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., p.243-263.

[23](#)Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p.161, referring to Hans Bakker: *Ayodhya*, Groningen 1987, and to Peter Van der Veer: *God must be liberated! A Hindu liberation movement in Ayodhya*, *Modern Asia Studies*, 1987.

[24](#)Antony Copley: *Secularism Reconsidered, Contemporary South Asia* 1993, 2 (1), p. 57.

[25](#)Antony Copley: *Secularism Reconsidered, Contemporary South Asia* 1993, 2 (1), p. 58.

[26](#)Antony Copley: *Secularism Reconsidered, Contemporary South Asia* 1993, 2 (1), p.58.

[27](#)Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p. 160.

[28](#)Important contributions to the debate from the Hindu side include the official argumentation by the Vishva Hindu Parishad, published as *History vs. Casuistry* by Voice of India 1991; *The Ayodhya Temple-Mosque Dispute, Focus on Muslim Sources* by Prof. Harsh Narain, Penman Publ., Delhi 1993; and, in a broader perspective, *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them* (2 vols.), by Sitaram Goel et al., Voice of India, 1990-1993.

[29](#)Syed Shahabuddins letter in Indian Express, 13-12-1990.

[30](#)Paul Teunissen in the Dutch bimonthly India Nu, January 1993. Note that he accepts my argumentation that the temple existed, so that Shahabuddin will have to get serious about his demolition promise.

[31](#)This point has been developed in the VHPs official rebuttal to the BMACs evidence bundle: *History vs. Casuistry*, p.57 and p.67. Of course, that document is absent from the bibliographies of practically all secularist publications on Ayodhya in India and abroad even though it represents the official position of the secularists own chosen enemy, the position which their publications purport to be rebutting.

[32](#)Wahiduddin Khan is an ideologue of the Tabligh movement (propagation of pure Islamic ways and abolition of remnants of Hindu culture among Muslims); A.A. Engineer routinely publishes prefabricated reports on communal riots in which the Muslim hand is systematically concealed, comparable to the pre-Partition Pirpur Report. Their commitment is to Islam, and their conciliatory stand on Ayodhya is only motivated by the calculation that at this point, Islamic interests are served better with a non-confrontational strategy.

[33](#)Though written in 1995, these words do not need serious amending even in January 2002.

[34](#)Quoted in K.N. Panikkar: *A Historical Overview*, in S. Gopal ed.: *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p.37 of the Penguin reprint 1993, from K.S. Lal: *Ramjanmabhumi - Some Issues*, in Organiser, October 1989. Remark that all the historical arguments developed by Prof. Lal, like all

those of other competent scholars, have been carefully kept out of view in S. Gopals book (which for most foreigners is the only source about the Ayodhya affair), while this one clumsy phrase has been seized upon to demonstrate the unhistorical and irrational basis of the Hindu position.

35 *To be sure, during the Ayodhya crisis, journalists managed to find an illiterate Rama devotee who, quoted from memory, declared: We cannot attain moksha (liberation) unless we can worship Rama at his very birthplace. In a political sense, one could argue that Hindu society is not really free as long as it has to suffer the occupation of its sacred sites by Islam; with that view, I agree. But the interviewee was apparently talking about spiritual liberation, which of course has nothing to do with the location of the place of Ramas birth.*

36 *I cannot mention Jesus at this point, because his birthplace is in doubt. The claim for Bethlehem was made only in an attempt to convince potential Jewish converts that Biblical predictions about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem had come true in Jesus.*

37 *A brilliant and thoroughly scientific analysis of Mohammeds psychology, strictly based on the authentic Islamic sources, has been developed by the Flemish psychologist Dr. Herman H. Somers in his Dutch-language book Een Andere Mohammed, Hadewijch, Antwerp 1992. His conclusions are, of course, not compatible with the fond beliefs of Islam. Since for some reason no English translation has been forthcoming, I am preparing an English summary myself.*

38 *Romila Thapars interview to Le Monde was reproduced in the September 1993 issue of India, bimonthly of Shanti Darshan Belgo-Indian Association.*

39 *That the claims to these sites were deliberately made up on non-historical grounds by the triumphant Church in the 4th century, is the thoroughly researched thesis of the New Zealand historian Joan Taylor: Christians and the Holy Places, Oxford University Press 1993.*

⁴⁰This peculiar Messiah-centred Jewish attitude to the Temple Mount is only one of the fundamental differences between the Jerusalem and the Ayodhya situation. It is only a symptom of laziness if not worse to describe the Temple Mount controversy as a Jewish Ayodhya.

⁴¹Romila Thapar: A historical perspective on the story of Rama, in S. Gopal, ed.: Anatomy of a Confrontation, p.141-163.

⁴²This claim was made in writing during the very first round of the Government-sponsored scholars debate. Embarrassed about their poor performance (which has gone strictly unreported in the media as well as in all academic publications), the BMAC negotiators have never published their argumentation; I could inspect a copy at the Deendayal Research Institute, Delhi. The specific pieces of proof are commented on in the VHP rebuttal: History vs. Casuistry, p.38-41.

⁴³The Supreme Court Judgment, in Swapan Dasgupta et al.: The Ayodhya Reference, p.43.

⁴⁴The Supreme Court Judgment, in Swapan Dasgupta et al.: The Ayodhya Reference, p-44.

10. Mohammed Habib's History-Rewriting

It is but rarely that a secularist or a Muslim actually takes issue with what I have written. Mostly they resort to swearwords and the use of institutional power to deny me access to important forums. So, when someone does take the trouble of reading a book of mine and even writing a rebuttal, I will gladly oblige and take my turn to comment on the comment.

10.1. Mohammed Habib's revolutionary project

The writings of the Dutch historian Koenraad Elst have recently become popular among the Hindutvavadis of India. He claims that official (or officially sanctioned) history in India is subject to negationism - the denial or playing down of Muslim crimes in the past, as well as of a history of Hindu-Muslim conflict. Thus writes Amber Habib in an article titled Elst on Habib, published on his private website.¹

My attention was drawn to it by a friend in 1999, but it may be a few years older, being a reaction to my 1993 book *Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam*. According to his homepage, Amber Habib turns out to be a Communist, son of Prof. Irfan Habib, grandson of Prof. Mohammed Habib, as well as grandnephew of Badruddin Tyabji, a leading Congress Muslim. The young mathematician living in Model Town, Delhi, has married a young lady with a Hindu name and Hindu looks, and after that he has started neglecting his website. Well, happiness is a sleeping website.¹

He seems to be a jolly good fellow, but having grown up with a reverence for Nehru and Lenin, his view of the Hindu-Muslim conflict is rather unfair. That is to say, by sounding balanced when commenting on a highly asymmetrical conflict, it does injustice to one of the parties. He sums up his view in this verse from Kabir: Hindu says Ram is the beloved, the Turk [Muslim] says Rahim. Then they kill each other. No one knows the secret.

Kabir belonged to a breed of Hindu converts to Islam who had retained their Hindu spiritual consciousness but poisoned it by imbibing categories of Islamic monotheism. He was the founder of the *Santa-mata* which had Hindu Bhakti of the Purans as its stock-in-trade but which paraded a monotheistic facade and poured contempt on the Hindu Pandit and the Muslim Mullah without knowing even the ABCD of Islam. That explains his great popularity in Nehruvian circles who know their Islam quite superficially but have developed contempt for Hinduism about which they know even less. Anyway, picking up a quarrel in the middle is pretty safe and mentally undemanding. But Kabirs symmetry is false. No Hindu ever killed a Muslim simply for not worshipping Rama, but numerous Hindus were killed by Muslims purely for not worshipping Rahim.

Let us come to the point. Amber Habib has better things to do than to argue with me: Due to the volume of charges thrown around by him, I cannot enter into a lengthy discussion of his views. This is convenient for the author, but I readily agree that life is too short and too precious to spend it on polemics. Habib jr. is willing to make one exception, though: However, I feel his discussion of Prof. Mohammad Habibs writings provides a useful example, by which his worth can be judged. The quotes below are from his book *Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam*. The readers who care, may make some judgments for themselves by reading excerpts from Prof. Habibs writings.

Here we go: Elst begins with: Around 1920 Aligarh historian Mohammed Habib launched a grand project to rewrite the history of the Indian religious conflict. The main points of his version of history are the following. Prof. Habibs specialization was the history of the Delhi Sultanate. Therefore he did write about what Elst sees only as Indian religious conflict. But this was not part of a larger grand project.

By grand project, I did not mean a grand research project, only a grand project of launching a new interpretation of the behaviour of Muslim conquerors in India. Given its far-reaching implications and its role as a model emulated by the dominant school of Indian historians, I believe that it is fair to call Prof. Habibs project grand.

Amber Habib continues: From the prefaces to his essay on Mahmud of Ghazni, it is also clear that Prof. Habib meant mainly to criticise the image of Mahmud as a religious hero among certain Muslims, and not to defend him in any way: There has recently grown up a tendency among some Musalmans of India to adore Mahmud as a saint, and to such [people], a scientific evaluation of his work and his policy will appear very painful. There is only one thing I need say in my defence. Islam as a creed stands by the principles of the Quran and the Life of the Apostle. If Sultan Mahmud and his followers strayed from the straight path - so much the worse for them. We want no idols.

But that was exactly my point. The consensus view, shared by Muslims (not only recently), Hindus and Westerners, was that Mahmud acted as a Muslim, implementing the code of the *mujahid* as laid down by the Prophet. Habib's new view was diametrically opposed to the centuries-old consensus: he claimed that Mahmud's behaviour strayed from the properly Islamic path. That he innovated by describing Mahmud's behaviour as un-Islamic is what I wrote, and Amber Habib has now confirmed it.

Habib jr. correctly relates: His first critics, therefore, were the self-same Muslims. And he quotes from Habib sr.'s foreword of a reprint of his essay: The book was hailed by a storm of criticism in the Urdu press. But as this criticism - vindictive, bitter, hostile - was based on a complete ignorance of the originals, I took no notice of it. I reprint the book as it was written.

So, here we have it from the horses mouth: the Muslims applauded Mahmud's behaviour and they considered it impeccably Islamic. I only disagree with the professors' claim that their conviction was due to ignorance.

10.2. Absolving Islam

Amber Habib then quotes me: Firstly, it was not all that serious. One cannot fail to notice that the Islamic chroniclers (including some rulers who wrote their own chronicles, like Teimur and Babar) have described the slaughter of Hindus, the abduction of their women and children, and the destruction of their places of worship most gleefully. But, according to Habib, these were merely exaggerations by court poets out to please their

patrons. One wonders what it says about Islamic rulers that they felt flattered by the bloody details which the Muslims chroniclers of Hindu persecutions have left us. At any rate, Habib has never managed to underpin this convenient hypothesis with a single fact.

This is followed by the rebuttal: Prof. Habib made no such claim. Again, it is best to quote him directly: No honest historian should seek to hide, and no Musalman acquainted with his faith will try to justify, the wanton destruction of temples that followed in the wake of the Ghaznavid army. Contemporary as well as later historians do not attempt to veil the nefarious acts but relate them with pride. He does say that much of what was written about Mahmud, was written hundreds of years after the fact, by a group seeking to legitimize itself by first canonizing Mahmud and then using him as a prior example setter.

Here, Amber Habib may have a point. The quotation given should not be used to represent the whole of the eminent historians writing on Mahmud and the Sultanate, but judged all by itself, it does indeed acknowledge as factual the atrocities committed by Mahmud. In that respect at least, he did better than some of the later secularists, with whose more crassly negationist claims I seem to have confused Habib's position. As for those who glorified Mahmud centuries after the fact, they based their stories on contemporary accounts, of which Habib sr. himself admitted that they accurately described Mahmud's atrocities and destruction.

Next, my turn again to be quoted: Secondly, that percentage of atrocities on Hindus which Habib was prepared to admit as historical, is not to be attributed to the impact of Islam, but to other factors. Sometimes Islam was used as a justification post factum, but this was deceptive. In reality economic motives were at work. The Hindus amassed all their wealth in temples and therefore Muslim armies plundered these temples.

That Habib sr. made this claim concerning Mahmud, is already clear from the quotations given above. His whole point was to absolve Islam and attribute the crimes Mahmud committed to other factors such as, here, the desire for booty. Habib jr. comments: Prof. Habib says this for the example of Mahmud of Ghazni. If he has made a more general claim to this effect, I have not been able to find it in his *Collected Works*. Which brings up the

matter of Elsts method - one should note the lack of direct quotation or reference.

It is funny how often I, as a writer of heavy books overburdened with quotations and footnotes, have been attacked for not providing footnotes in my book Negationism in India, which had been started as a mere review article (of Sita Ram Goels book *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them*) and was retained in that format even after growing to the size of a book in its own right. I referred to Habibs writings purely from memory, having read some of them in India months or years before penning that review.

Professor Habib, described here as a specialist on the Delhi Sultanate, had to deal with many more Muslim fanatics and iconoclasts, the Delhi Sultanate being one of the most violent regimes in history. Invariably, sultans oppressing Hinduism invoked the tenets of Islam as justification. If we are to believe Amber Habib, it was only in the case of Mahmud Ghaznavi that the august professor disconnected behaviour from religion. So in all the other cases, say Malik Kafur, Alauddin Khilji or Sikander Lodi, Habib admitted their Islamic motivation? Habib can be quoted as confirming the Islamic injunction to idol-breaking as demonstrated by many Muslim rulers in India?

That is still not what I recall, but, not having Habibs *Collected Works* handy even now, I am willing to take Habib jr.s word for it. Let us assume that I wrongly extrapolated Habib sr.s view of Mahmud Ghaznavi to Muslim rulers in general. Note, however, that this extrapolation would be accurate for most of Habibs followers among todays AMU and JNU faculty, and even foreign scholars like Richard Eaton, who do make these exonerating claims about Islam in the case of Muslim conquerors in general.

10.3. The ethnic factor

The next quotation from my own text is this: Thirdly, according to Habib there was also a racial factor: these Muslims were mostly Turks, savage riders from the steppes who would need several centuries before getting civilized by the wholesome influence of Islam. Their inborn barbarity cannot be attributed to the doctrines of Islam.

I readily admit that my choice of the word racial was cheap and demagogic. Nowadays, racism passes for the ultimate mortal sin and I could not withstand the temptation to insinuate an allegation of racism against my opponents. Given the looseness with which the term racism is used nowadays, the massacres of Hindus by Muslims and the concentrated hatred of secularists for the Hindus could easily qualify as racist. But coming back to reality, the fact remains that Habib and many others have described the pre-Islamic and freshly-islamized Turks as barbaric, and used that classification to explain some of their behaviour without implicating Islam.

Amber Habib sets the record straight: Prof. Habib did talk about relatively uncivilized Turks, but this was in the context of their conflicts with the Persians. In his descriptions, these are not the Turks who made it to India - and further the first Muslim invaders of India were not Turks in any case. Phrases such as inborn barbarity seem quite foreign to Prof. Habib's world-view and writing style and are more likely a projection by Elst of his own weird classifications of peoples. Prof. Habib's argument is quite the opposite of what is presented here. He did not describe barbarians who were not yet soothed by Islam - but a sophisticated ruling class that perverted the ideals of Islam to its own ends.

Before replying, allow me to quote one more round of Amber Habib's argument. I am quoted as writing: Mohammed Habib's exercise in history-rewriting cannot stand the test of historical criticism on any score. We can demonstrate this with the example of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (997-1030), already mentioned, who carried out a number of devastating raids in Sindh, Gujarat and Panjab. This Ghaznavi was a Turk, certainly, but in many respects he was not a barbarian: he patronized arts and literature (including the great Persian poet Firdausi, who would end up in trouble because his patron suspected him of apostasy, and the Persian but Arabic-writing historian Albiruni) and was a fine calligraphist himself. The undeniable barbarity of his anti-Hindu campaigns cannot be attributed to his ethnic stock.

Habib jr. comments: Prof. Habib does not attribute Mahmud's behaviour to his being a Turk barbarian, but (to the extent that background can be

blamed) to the spirit of the Persian Renaissance and the subsequent submission of the Islamic ideal to the whims and desires of the rulers. To say Mahmud patronised Alberuni is a bit of a stretch - for Alberuni was a captive from one of Mahmuds western campaigns and, while he travelled in Mahmuds train, he enjoyed no special privileges. (his bitterness towards Mahmud is quite explicit in his *Kitab-al-Hind*.)

Thank you, Amber, for this detail about Alberunis life story. It is most interesting to learn that one of the greatest scholars of the Muslim Golden Age, an admirer of India moreover, was not honoured in proportion to his exceptional merits, but was actually a captive and treated as one. But to return to the main point: as I already admitted, it is possible that at some points I have conflated Habibs views with those of other secularists. It is very common in those circles to explain away the misdeeds of Muslims with ethnic factors of barbarity, e.g. numerous modern publications on the Prophet justify his use of violent means in imposing Islam as a regrettable but inevitable effect of the prevalent barbarity of the Arabs. The allegation of ethnic barbarity against Arabs or Turks is not my own weird classification of peoples but standard fare in pro-Islamic apologetics. My point is that this ethnic-cultural explanation of Islamic behaviour is wrong, for the Arabs were not at all barbaric. They had many tempering conventions concerning warfare, and Prophet Mohammeds novel contribution was precisely to break these and wage a total war.

Mohammed Habib and Amber Habib have certainly not convinced me that Mahmuds crimes are in any way due to the Persian Renaissance. Firdausi was the prime exponent of this trend, and he was never guilty of such crimes. And it was precisely because he took the Persian heritage too seriously that he got in trouble with the Islamic establishment including Mahmud.

But even if we accept the Habib theory, and if we agree that Habibs line in exonerating Islam of Mahmuds crimes is unrelated to considerations of ethnic barbarity, we still maintain that his line was wrong. The explanation of Mahmuds behaviour as un-Islamic, whether from savagery or from decadent oversophistication, is wrong in any case. The sophisticated ruling class in Mahmuds kingdom has not perverted the ideals of Islam to its own

ends. Those who cultivated the Persian heritage did not destroy Hindu temples, while those who did persecute Hindus and destroy their cultural treasures have not done more than to faithfully apply the Islamic ideals. They emulated the precedents set by the Prophet of Islam himself.

10.4. Conversion by force, or was it by fraud?

Amber Habib has no quarrel with my following paraphrase of Mohammed Habibs position: Finally, the violence of the Islamic warriors was of minor importance in the establishment of Islam in India. What happened was not so much a conquest, but a shift in public opinion: when the urban working-class heard of Islam and realized it now had a choice between Hindu law (smriti) and Muslim law (shariat) it chose the latter. There, I was merely paraphrasing a very famous phrase of Prof. Habibs, one not pertaining to Mahmud Ghaznavi but to Mohammed Ghori and his lieutenants.²

Amber comments: Prof. Habib did believe that the sword failed to win any significant number of converts to Islam. In his view, the sword-wielders were only out for gain in this world and were not interested in conversions. Nor does he believe they would have succeeded had they tried. He gives credit instead to the Sufis and such preachers who spread a more egalitarian version of Islam through the country.

In Prophet Mohammeds biography by Ibn Ishaq, we find that practically all Arab conversions to Islam were the fruit of the sword. When Pagan tribes saw that their chances to hold out against Mohammeds military onslaught had become very small, most agreed to acquiesce in the lesser evil, viz. to give up their culture rather than their lives. Others had joined Mohammed earlier for another sword-related reason: as fellow fighters in Mohammeds Jihad, they would be entitled to a share in the war booty. Yet others, typically unthinking youngsters including the daughter of the leading family of Mecca, were eager to join what seemed to them to be the wave of the future, the army that went from victory to victory. It was only a very small minority that joined Mohammed because of a heartfelt belief that his claim of hearing Allahs own voice was genuine.

In India and other countries, the percentages of the different categories of converts may have been divided differently, but the military superiority of Islam was practically always the overriding factor, directly or indirectly. Many were literally converted at swordpoint, but the largest number of converts were probably those, mostly in the urban artisanal castes, who wanted to escape the jizya tax and the numerous other disabilities imposed on non-Muslims, - a legal discrimination which supposed the existence of an Islamic regime, and this regime was invariably established by force. But I will concede that in some cases, gullible people were taken in by Muslim preachers or sufis who managed to link Islam with certain virtues or mystical experiences in the minds of their audiences. Even today, absolutely any self-styled prophet or cult leader manages to get a following, so why not in the Middle Ages?

But that does not mean that an opinion poll was held in which the Indians were given a reasoned choice between the *Smriti* and the *Shariat* (Hindu c.q. Muslim law) and then decided on the basis of their preference between these two. In any event, the law governing their day-to-day lives didn't change much upon conversion, for most recent converts retained their Hindu customs (which in turn were generally not determined by the abstract *Smriti* but by caste tradition) for generations. To most converts, their first bite into beef, the classic test of abandonment of Hinduism, tasted very bitter, but they judged it was worth the nausea because it would increase their chances in life under an Islamic regime. The key fact here was not any egalitarian pretence of Islam, but precisely the inequality which it imposed between Muslims and Hindus of comparable social standing.

10.5. Ghaznavi vs. other Muslim conquerors

About Mahmud Ghaznavi, I am quoted as writing: There is no record of his being welcomed by urban artisans as a liberator from the oppressive Hindu social system. On the contrary, his companion Albiruni testifies how all the Hindus had an inveterate aversion for all Muslims.

Amber Habib comments: No such claim is made for Mahmud by Prof. Habib. Let us quote him again: It was inevitable that the Hindus should consider Islam a deviation from the truth when its followers deviated so deplorably from the path of rectitude and justice. A people is not

conciliated by being robbed of all that it holds most dear, nor will it love a faith that comes to it in the guise of plundering armies and leaves devastated fields and ruined cities as monuments of its victorious method for reforming the morals of a prosperous but erratic world ... the policy of Mahmud secured the rejection of Islam without a hearing.

Amber Habibs whole argument hinges on a supposed contrast in behaviour between Mahmud and the other sultans. But that contrast is in most cases false. The real conqueror of India for Islam, Mohammed Shihabuddin Ghori, has left a trail of destruction behind him of entirely similar proportions. The same thing is true, on a geographically smaller but otherwise similar scale, for other Muslim conquerors, including Timur, Babar, Ahmad Shah Abdali and down to the Pakistani irregulars who conquered parts of Kashmir in 1947. If Mahmud could not win the hearts of the Indians, then neither could his successors. They all set the Hindus firmly against Islam, precisely because they did ensure that Islam got a proper hearing. They showed Islam in the true colours of Prophet Mohammed. But for their military superiority, they would have welcomed extremely few Hindu converts into the Muslim fold.

But what about Mahmuds chief predecessor, Mohammed bin Qasim? I am quoted thus: His [Mahmuds] massacres and acts of destruction were merely a replay of what the Arab Mohammed bin Qasim had wrought in Sindh in 712-15. He didnt care for material gain: he left rich mosques untouched, but poor Hindu temples met the same fate at his hands as the richer temples. He turned down a Hindu offer to give back a famous idol in exchange for a huge ransom: I prefer to appear on judgement Day as an idol-breaker rather than an idol-seller. The one explanation that covers all the relevant facts, is that he was driven to his barbarous acts by his ideological allegiance to Islam.

Amber Habib comments: Prof. Habib points to many significant differences between Mohammed Qasim and Mahmud. The former was interested in setting up a fair government and in obtaining the consent and approval of the local population. He dealt harshly with opposing soldiers but left the civil population alone. It is not clear why Elst refers to mosques being left untouched. Mosques contain no riches - so this would be entirely

in consonance with Prof. Habibs view of Mahmud as a grand looter. Further, there could not have been many mosques at this time in India, let alone rich ones. Perhaps he is referring to Mahmuds western campaigns. Prof. Habibs thesis is that Mahmuds desire was to expand his empire to the west, and the raids in the east were to provide finance as well as the mantle of a religious warrior. It is quite consistent with this that he would be more destructive in the east than the west. The story of the ransom is likely a latter day fabrication by those seeking to enhance Mahmuds status as a religious hero - it makes little sense for Mahmud to be bargaining with those he has just utterly defeated. Further, there are accounts of other occasions when Mahmud left a town alone on receiving a ransom.

It is true, as I discovered later on, that the story about Mahmud refusing the ransom is a. later fable retailed by the sufi poet Attar. I mentioned it at that time as I found it in almost all books on Mahmud and very popular among Muslim in praise of Mahmud as an idol-breaker. But even if it was true, the secularists would have ignored it or called it another bit of court poetry. Whenever the secularists find historical testimonies inconvenient, they fatally hear words like myth or fabrication crossing their lips. In this case it happens to be true that a later poet dramatized Mahmuds well-known religious zeal into this story of his refusing the ransom and preferring to break the idol. But it is only an extra to a sizable body of evidence, and declaring it a fabrication wont alter our solid knowledge about Mahmuds Islamic zeal.

It is possible but by no means certain that Mahmud only came to India to plunder, not to conquer. This thesis is put forward by historians who want to avoid the impression that Mahmud was, in a way, defeated by Hindu strength and hence unable to incorporate India into his kingdom. Habib, though critical of Mahmud because of his poor public relations job for Islam, seems to have been among those eager to uphold Mahmuds military reputation. The effort seems to be in conflict with elementary logic. Since Mahmud saw India as a source of wealth useful in financing his western campaigns, it would have been more logical to conquer India and enjoy a regular supply of its wealth. In fact, he *did* annex those parts of India where Hindu resistance could be overcome, that is, Gandhar (northern Afghanistan and Panjab upto Sindh), and western Punjab upto Lahore from which parts

he was able to drive away the Hindu Shahiyas after a series of tough battles. In the rest of India he encountered unyielding resistance and we can surmise that though (like Mohammed Ghori) he intended to conquer India, he settled for mere material plunder and religious destruction simply because he wasn't strong enough for a durable conquest.

But for now, let us go with the convenient secularist theory that he merely came to India with a limited agenda of plundering. In that case, pray, why did he have to break stone idols? These cannot be melted and turned into gold coins or iron swords. Why did he have to desecrate temples in all kinds of ways apart from merely taking out their golden objects? Clearly, his concern was not merely financial, it was also religious.

I am quoted thus: The contention that Hindus stored their riches in temples is completely plucked out of thin air (though some of the richer temples contained golden statues, which were temple property): it is one among many ad hoc hypotheses which make Habib's theory a methodologically indefensible construction. In fact, Habib is proclaiming a grand conspiracy theory: all the hundreds of Islamic authors who declared unanimously that what they reported was a war of Islam against Infidelity, would all have co-ordinated one single fake scenario to deceive us.

And Amber Habib comments: Even in present times, temples are recipients of considerable donations. Certainly, the writers of the time describe the temples as sources of immense wealth. Prof. Habib gives the following quote about Mahmud's sacking of Somnath: Not a hundredth part of the gold and precious stones he obtained from Somnath were to be found in the treasury of any king of Hindustan.

Habib jr. does not answer my main point, viz. that Muslim conquerors including Mahmud destroyed many Hindu religious statues and buildings regardless of financial value. Numerous Muslim sources testify to the religious motive. Alright, some religious objects in temples were made-of precious material, but they were not the only ones targeted by Muslim iconoclasts; stone and terra cotta sculptures were also destroyed.

Finally, the distinction which Mohammed Habib and Amber Habib keep on making between plundering and Jihad, between material gain and religious zeal, is a false one in the case of Islam. For a Muslim, emulating the Prophet Mohammed it is the religious act par excellence. The Prophet himself organized numerous raids on caravans and Jewish as well Arab settlements, 82 according to an oft-quoted count. Looting the wealth of the merchants, taking the passengers as hostages and raping the women among them: all this was performed by the Prophet and his most trusted companions. Mahmud Ghaznavi accomplished a very pious mission when he repeated all these prophetic precedents.

10.6. Not the Muslims are guilty, but Islam

My conclusion about this topic is quoted thus: Habib tried to absolve the ideology (Islam) of the undeniable facts of persecution and massacre of the Pagans by blaming individuals (the Muslims). The sources however point to the opposite state of affairs: Muslim fanatics were merely faithful executors of Quranic injunctions. Not the Muslims are guilty, but Islam.

But Amber Habib disagrees: On the contrary, Prof. Habib drew a careful distinction between the original Islamic ideal, and the corrupted version adopted by the Muslim invaders and ruling classes in India. He spared no effort in taking the latter to task, while espousing the former as a worthy ideal.

Well, that is exactly my point. Mohammed Habib tried to convince his readers that a consistent behaviour pattern of Muslim conquerors was un-Islamic even though it was nothing but an application of the precedent set by Prophet Mohammed himself. On that understanding of his position, at least, we seem to be in agreement. We only differ in evaluating the eminent historians opinion: Amber thinks he was right, I have argued that he was mistaken.

About my essential conclusion, Amber Habib writes: Elsts distinction: Not the Muslims are guilty, but Islam, is a perplexing one. What does this mean in practice? Is the religion of Islam to be tried and convicted but its followers left in peace? It is clear this cannot be. His distinction therefore is mere sophistry.

The word therefore, which implies that a reasoning is being concluded, is a little too much honour for the lone sentence: It is clear this cannot be. Someone who is on his own admission perplexed by a statement, should not go on to claim that its meaning and implications are clear to him. It seems to me that he hasn't understood my position that not the Muslims are guilty, but Islam.

My position is exactly the one which in Amber Habib's opinion cannot be. Yes, I think that the religion of Islam is to be tried and convicted but its followers left in peace. Just as geocentrism should be tried and thrown out but its believers should be left in peace. Galilei didn't think his opponents should be burned at the stake or otherwise troubled. All they needed was some exposure to free thinking about their cherished but untenable belief.

Amber Habib concludes: To summarise, it is clear that Elst's case against Prof. Habib rests mainly on a wholesale fabrication of his views and arguments - these are distorted till they become less feasible, and then attacked using rather questionable facts. Why does Elst need to take recourse to such tactics? It would suggest an attempt to hide the weaknesses and gaps in his own arguments, by shifting attention to the ones he has constructed in his opponents.

I will not try to snatch the last word from my worthy opponent. By now, the reader is sufficiently informed to judge the matter for himself.

It is usual for Muslim apologists of Islam to proclaim that Islam was and is being misrepresented by the mujahids of the past and the present and that true Islam stands for peace and tolerance. But they never tell us where to find the true Islam they are talking about. Let them proclaim once for all that true Islam has nothing to do with the Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Mohammed. Surely they cannot claim a monopoly over studying and interpreting Islamic scriptures. The world has not yet become an Islamic theocracy; kafirs are still and most likely to continue to be in majority and they have freedom to find out what those scriptures prescribe for them.

Footnotes:

¹Vide www.geocities.com/a_habib/Dada/elst.html. Not that it is important, but I am Flemish, i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgian.

²Quoted e.g. by Prabha Dixit: Prof. Mohammed Habibs historical fallacies, in Devahuti, ed.: *Bias in Indian Historiography*, D.K. Publ., Delhi 1980, p.202, from K.A. Nizami, ed.: *Politics and Society in the Early Medieval Period (Collected Works of Professor Mohammed Habib)*, Delhi 1974, vol. 1, p.72.

11. The Ayodhya Evidence Debate

This paper was written as an adaptation from an earlier paper, The Ayodhya debate, published in the conference proceedings of the 1991 International Ramayana Conference, which had taken place in my hometown, Leuven.¹ The present version represents my own text prepared for the October 1995 Annual South Asia Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, U. S.A. A few notes have been added.

The atmosphere at the conference was frankly hostile. After the academic authorities, who may have been ignorant of my controversial reputation, had allowed my paper to be read, the practical organization of the panel session was entrusted to graduate students belonging to the Indian Communist organization, *Forum of Indian Leftists* (FOIL). They scheduled me as the last speaker in a panel of four, chaired by an Indian female graduate student, a nice girl but obviously unable to perform the most difficult duty of a panel chairperson, viz. keeping the speakers to their allotted time. Moreover, they arranged for our session to be held in a room where another panel was scheduled at noon, making it impossible for the last speaker to read his paper in excess of the panel sessions allotted time. Two panel speakers played along by comfortably expounding and repeating the points they could easily have made in half the time.

It was up to people from the audience to protest and oblige the chairperson to allow me to read out my paper. When it was my turn, I was heckled somewhat by the Leftist crowd, especially by a well-known Indo-American Communist academic, who was rolling his eyes like a madman and making obscene gestures until an elderly American lady sitting next to him told him to behave. At the end, Mathew came to collect a copy of my text (the book version, of which I had some authors copies handy), called me a liar, and told his buddies that they needed to write a scholarly rebuttal. Which is still being awaited today.

11.1. Introduction

One of the contenders in the Ayodhya history debate, the hypothesis that the Babri Masjid had been built in forcible replacement of a Hindu temple, had been a matter of universal consensus until a few years ago. Even the Muslim participants in court cases in the British period had not challenged it; on the contrary, Muslim authors expressed pride in this monument of Islamic victory over infidelity. It is only years after the Hindu take-over of the structure in 1949 that denials started to be voiced.² And it is only in 1989 that a large-scale press campaign was launched to deny what had earlier been a universally accepted fact.

In normal academic practice, the debate on an issue on which such a consensus exists, would only have been opened after the discovery of new facts which undermine the consensus view. The present debate is between a tradition which numerous observers and scholars had found coherent and well-founded, and an artificial hypothesis based on political compulsions instead of on newly discovered facts.

In an effort to move the debate forward, the Government of India provided the contending parties with an official forum in which experts could go through the evidence produced for both sides. This scholarly exchange took place around the turn of 1991, and was briefly revived in the autumn of 1992. Both rounds of the debate were unilaterally broken off by the Babri Masjid party.

This paper is intended to fill the gap left by the general media in the information on the debate about the historical claims concerning the Rama-Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya. As the only non-Indian scholar to have followed this dispute closely, I will argue that the scholars debate has ended in an unambiguous victory for one of the two parties.³

11.2.The object of the debate

As is well-known by now, on Ramas supposed birthplace in Ayodhya there used to stand a disputed mosque structure. It was called the *Babri Masjid* because according to an inscription on its front wall it was built at the orders of the Moghul invader Babar in 1528, by his lieutenant Mir Baqi. But until the beginning of this century, official documents called it *Masjid-i-Janamsthan*, mosque of the birthplace, and the hill on which it

stands was designated as *Ramkot* (Ramas fort) or *Janamsthan* (birthplace). Since 1949, the building is effectively in use as a Hindu temple, but many Hindus, and especially the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP)⁴, want to explicitate the Hindu function of the place with proper Hindu temple architecture, which implied removing the existing structure. On the other hand, the *Babri Masjid Action Committee* (BMAC) and its splinter, the *Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee* (BMMCC), want the building, and after its demolition at least the site, to be given back to the Muslim community.

In December 1990 and January 1991, at the request of the Chandra Shekhar Government, the BMAC and the VHP exchanged historical evidence for their respective cases. It was broken off on 25 January 1991 when the BMAC representatives, without any explanation, failed to show up at the meeting scheduled for that day. The debate was revived in October 1992 by the Narasimha Rao Government, with essentially the same teams, but the next month, the BMAC withdrew in protest against the VHPs announcement of a Kar Seva (building activity) due on 6 December 1992.

It is strange (but perfectly explainable, as we shall see) that this debate has not received more attention in scholarly and journalistic writings. It was, after all, the only occasion where both parties could not manipulate evidence without being subject to pointed criticism from the opposing side. Many reporters on the Ayodhya conflict have made tall claims about the concoction of bogus evidence (not to mention Goebbelsian propaganda), and to substantiate these, there could hardly be a better mine of information than this Government-sponsored debate. Yet, most of them refuse to even mention it.

A report on this debate should distinguish between three possible debating issues:

- 1) Is the present-day Ayodhya with all its Rama-related sites, the Ayodhya described by Valmiki in his Sanskrit Ramayana? In the course of this debate, no new facts have been added to Prof. B.B. Lals conclusion that Valmikis Ayodhya and present-day Ayodhya are one and the same place.⁵ It is a different matter that his conclusions have been disputed, without any

evidence, by the JNU historians among others. Of course, it is nobodys case that the Valmiki connection has been established in an unassailable manner; but at least, what much of research is available, points in that direction. However, even if B.B. Lals assertion is correct, this leaves open the possibility that the writer who styled himself Valmiki, may have written his version of the Rama story long after it actually took place, and that he relocated the scene of a tradition coming from elsewhere into his own area. Therefore, the next, more fundamental question might be:

2) Is the present-day Ayodhya, and more specifically the disputed site, indeed the birthplace of a historical character called Rama? The BMAC has argued that such a thing cannot be proven, assuming that Rama was a historical character at all. The VHP has refused to consider this question, arguing that religions do not have to justify the sacredness of their sacred sites: if the site was traditionally associated with sacred events and characters (as it was, at least from Valmiki onwards), or if it was treated by Rama devotees as somehow sacred (as it was since at least several centuries), then that should be enough to command respect, regardless of the historical basis of this claim to sacredness.

Compare with the Muslim sacred places: there is no historical substance at all in Mohammeds claim that the Kaaba in Mecca had been built by Abraham as a place of monotheistic worship. This story had to justify the take-over of the Kaaba from its real owners, the idolaters of Arabia. And yet, in spite of the starkly unhistorical nature of the Muslim claim to the Kaaba, this claim is not being questioned. Nobody is saying that the Muslims can only have their Kaaba if they give historical proof that it was built by Abraham.⁶

Therefore the VHP insists that if the disputed site is a genuine traditional sacred site, this must be enough to make others respect it as such. However, if it was really a Hindu sacred site, it is reasonable to expect that this status was explicitated with a temple, which must have adorned the site before the Babri Masjid was built. So, the third question is:

3) Was the Babri Masjid built in forcible replacement of a preexisting Rama temple? The Muslim fundamentalist leader Syed Shahabuddin, convenor of the BMMCC (and initiator of the campaign against Salman

Rushdie)⁷ agrees with the VHP that this is the fundamental question. He has said repeatedly:

If it is proven that the Babri Masjid has been built in forcible replacement of a Hindu temple, I will demolish it with my own hands.⁸ So, the subject matter of the debate can be limited to the question whether a Hindu temple had been destroyed to make way for the Babri Masjid.

In November 1990, in a letter to the newly appointed Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, the late Sri Rajiv Gandhi (whose Congress Party was supporting the new Government) had also proposed to narrow down the debate to this one question. Sri Gandhi suggested that the decision of whether to leave the disputed building to the Hindus (who were using it as a temple) or to give it to the Muslims (who had used it as a mosque), should be taken on the basis of historical and archaeological evidence regarding the specific point whether the Babri Masjid had replaced a preexisting Hindu temple. It is this letter from Rajiv Gandhi which prompted Chandra Shekhar to invite the contending parties to have a scholarly exchange of historical evidence.

11.3. Chronicle of the semi-official debate

Both parties met on 1 December and 4 December 1990, and they agreed to submit and confront historical material supporting their respective viewpoints. On 23 December, the VHP and the BMAC submitted their respective bundles of evidence. On 10 January 1991, both sides submitted rejoinders to their opponents evidence bundles. At least, the VHP scholars gave a detailed reply to all the documents presented by the BMAC. But the latter merely handed in yet another pile of newspaper articles and more-such non-evidential statements of opinion. This created the impression that the BMAC was effectively conceding defeat.

On January 24, the parties met in order to discuss the evidence. But the BMAC team leader, Prof. R.S. Sharma, a well-known Marxist historian, said that he and his colleagues had not yet studied the VHP material (to which the BMAC had agreed to reply by January 10). This is most remarkable, because the week before, he had led 42 academics in signing a much-publicized statement, saying that there was definitely absolutely no

proof whatsoever at all for the preexisting Rama temple. He had issued more statements on the matter, and even published a small book on it.⁹ There he was, pleading a lack of familiarity with the very material on which he had been making such tall statements.

The other historians for the BMAC were Athar Ali, D. N. Jha and Suraj Bhan, apart from the office bearers of the BMAC itself. The four BMAC historians have published their argumentation some months later: *Ramjanmabhumi Babri Masjid, A Historians Report to the Nation*. Tellingly, they do not mention the outcome of the debate, but reiterate the ludicrous demand they made while attending the debate as BMAC advocates, viz. that they be considered independent historians qualified to pronounce scientific judgment in a debate between their employers and their enemies.¹⁰

Of course, the government representative dismissed this demand as ridiculous. Yet, the BMAC has continued to call them the independent historians, and they themselves have continued to demand that the VHP submit its case to independent arbitration, i.e. by their own kind. These two telling details of the Ayodhya debate story have, of course, been withheld from the reader in the booklet published by the BMAC team, and in all subsequent publications by the anti-temple party.

The next meeting was scheduled for the next day, January 25. But there, the BMAC scholars simply did not show up. The unambiguous result of the debate was this: the BMAC scholars have run away from the arena. They had not presented written evidence worth the name, they had not given a written refutation of the VHP scholars arguments, they had wriggled out of a face-to-face discussion on the accumulated evidence, and finally they had just stayed away. Thus ended the first attempt by the Government of India to find an amicable solution on the basis of genuine historical facts.

In October 1992, the Narasimha Rao Government tried to revive this discussion forum. Due to personal differences, Prof. R.S. Sharma stayed away from the BMAC team, which otherwise consisted of the same people. The debate focused almost entirely on the interpretation of the

archaeological findings of June 1992: a large number of Hindu sculptures and other temple remains, found in the terrain in front of the disputed building. The BMAC team argued that these findings had all been planted. It also demanded that in view of the ongoing negotiations, the VHP cancel its programme scheduled for 6 December 1992 in Ayodhya. When the VHP refused, the BMAC stayed away from the talks once more.

11.4. The pro-temple evidence

On Ayodhya, there has always in living memory been a consensus: among local Muslims and Hindus, among European travellers and British administrators. As late as 1989, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (entry *Ayodhya*) reports without a trace of hesitation that the Babri Masjid was built in forcible replacement of a temple marking Ramas birthplace. When there is such a consensus on a given issue, the academic custom is not to reopen the debate until someone comes with serious evidence that the consensus opinion is wrong and that a different scenario is indicated by newfound (or newly interpreted) facts. But the only evidence to surface during the debate was presented by the VHP-mandated team and merely reconfirmed the old consensus.

The VHPs evidence bundle was not just a pile of separate documents.¹¹ It was centred around a careful argumentation, which can be summed up in three points:

1) A single hypothesis. Only one hypothesis is put forward, viz. that the disputed place was traditionally (since before the Muslim period) venerated as Ramas birthplace, that a Rama temple had stood on it, and that this temple was destroyed to make way for the Babri Masjid. All the material collected goes to confirm this one hypothesis. Not a single piece of documentary or archaeological evidence contradicts it. The contrast with the anti-Janmabhoomi polemists is striking they have so far not produced any document that positively indicates a different scenario from the one upheld by the VHP scholars. The BMAC effort has been only. negative, viz. trying to pick holes in the pro-temple evidence, but the VHP has posited its own hypothesis that takes care of all the relevant data.

2) Temple foundations. Archaeological findings in Prof. B.B. Lal's excavation campaign *Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites* 1975-80 and more recent ones as well as a large number of documents written *in tempore non suspecto* confirm the hypothesis. Findings of burnt-brick pillar-bases dated to the 11th century in trenches a few metres from the disputed structure, prove that a pillared building stood in alignment with, and on the same foundations system as the Babri Masjid. The written documents do not include an eye-witness account of the temple destruction, the way we have eye-witness accounts of the destruction of many other temples. But then, a wealth of documents, written from the 17th century onwards, by European travellers, and by local Muslims, confirm unanimously that the Babri Masjid was considered to have been built in forcible replacement of a Rama temple. These witnesses also describe first-hand how the place was revered by the Hindus as Rama's birthsite, and that Hindus always came back to worship as closely as possible to the original temple site: they would not reasonably have done this except in continuation of a tradition dating back to before the Babri Masjid.

3) The single hypothesis is consistent with known patterns. No *ad hoc* hypotheses are needed to support the main hypothesis, no unusual scenarios have to be invented, no unusual motives have to be attributed to the people involved, no conspiracy theory has to be conjured up. The VHP hypothesis merely says that well-established general patterns of Hindu and Muslim behaviour apply to the specific case under consideration. Among these are to be noted:

Firstly, the fact that a temple stood on the now-disputed site, which is a hilltop overlooking Ayodhya, is in perfect conformity with a world-wide practice of putting important buildings, like castles and temples, on the topographical place of honour. By contrast, the hypothesis that the Babri Masjid had been built on an empty spot presupposes an abnormal course of events, viz. that the people of the temple city Ayodhya had left the place of honour empty.

Secondly, the demolition of Hindu temples and their forcible replacement by mosques has been a very persistent behaviour pattern of the Muslim conquerors. These temple demolitions were consistent with the persecution

of disbelief carried out by Islamic rulers from Mohammed bin Qasim (who conquered Sindh in 712) to Aurangzeb (the last great Moghul, d. 1707), and more recently in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir. Though there is no lack of *negationists* who try to deny or conceal it, the historical record bears out Will Durants assessment that the Mohammedan conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history.¹² It is safe to affirm that the majority of pre-1707 mosques in India has been built in forcible replacement of Hindu temples. Outside India, the Islamic take-over of the most sacred sites of other religions was equally systematic, e.g. the *Kaaba* in Mecca, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Aya Sophia in Istanbul, the Buddhist monastery in Bukhara etc.

Thirdly, the fact that Hindu temple materials (14 black-stone sculptured pillars) have been used in the Babri Masjid is not an unusual feature requiring a special explanation; on the contrary, it was a fairly common practice meant as a visual display of the victory of Islam over infidelity. It was done in many mosques that have forcibly replaced temples, e.g. the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi (in which a part of the Kashi Vishwanath temple is still visible)¹³, the Adhai-Din-ka-Jhonpra mosque in Ajmer, the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque in Delhi, or, outside India, the Jama Masjid of Damascus (which was a Christian cathedral).

Fourthly, the fact that Hindus used to keep on revering sacred sites even after mosques had been built on them, is attested by foreigners like Niccolo Manucci in the 17th and Alexander Cunningham in the 19th century.¹⁴ By contrast, the hypothesis that Hindus started laying an arbitrary claim on a place firmly occupied by the Muslims (so that they courted repression for no reason at all), is pretty fantastic and without parallel.

11.5. No direct evidence

The VHP evidence bundle also contained a large number of quotes from ancient literature to prove that the Rama cult is not a recent development, and that the status of Ayodhya as a sacred city has been uninterrupted since at least 2000 years. The one thing that is missing is the ultimate clinching evidence: a contemporary description of the forcible replacement of the temple with the mosque. But even in the absence of this item of primary

evidence, the amount of secondary evidence is so overwhelming, coherent and uncontradicted, that in another, less contentious historical search, it would be considered conclusive.

It may be recalled that, in the course of the public debate on the opinion pages of the newspapers, the pro-BMAC polemists had at first demanded non-British evidence, because the whole Janmabhoomi tradition was merely a British concoction. In A. G. Nooranis categorical words: The myth is a 19th-century creation by the British.¹⁵

Next, they demanded pre-19th-century evidence, because Hindus and Muslims had already interiorized the British propaganda early in that century, as is clear from a number of writings by local Muslims, brought to light by Prof. Harsh Narain. Thus, Mirza Jan, a Muslim militant who participated in an attempt to wrest from the Hindus another sacred site in Ayodhya, the Hanumangarhi, wrote in 1856 that a lofty mosque has been built by *badshah* Babar on the original birthplace of Rama, in application of the rule that where there was a big temple, a big mosque was constructed, and where there was a small temple, a small mosque was constructed.¹⁶ Therefore, Muslim leader Mohammed Abdul Rahim Qureishi has asked the pro-Janmabhoomi side to produce any historical evidence, not only independent of the British sources but also of the period prior to the advent of the 19th century.¹⁷

But this type of evidence was also produced: most publicly the Austrian Jesuit Joseph Tieffenthalers 1767 account, presented by Mr. Abhas Kumar Chatterjee in *Indian Express*. Tieffenthaler describes how Hindus celebrated *Ram Navami* (commemorating Ramas birth) just outside the Babri Masjid, and recounts the local tradition that the mosque was built in forcible replacement of Ramas birthplace temple.¹⁸

It was also pointed out that the Muslim writer Mirza Jan, already mentioned, had given an extensive quotation from an (otherwise unknown) letter by a daughter of Aurangzebs son and successor, Bahadur Shah. He quotes her as writing in about 1710 that the temples on the sacred sites of Shiva, Krishna and Rama (including Sitas kitchen, i.e. part of the Ramkot complex) were all demolished for the strength of Islam, and at all these

places mosques have been constructed. She exhorted the Muslims to assert their presence at these mosques and not to give in to Hindu compromise proposals.¹⁹

Furthermore, a letter dated 1735 by a Faizabad qazi (judge) was shown, describing Hindu-Muslim riots in Ayodhya over the Masjid built by the emperor of Delhi, i.e. either a pre-Moghul sultan or Moghul dynasty founder Babar (Aurangzeb moved the Moghul capital from Delhi/Agra to the Dekkhan). This is only a secondary indication for the actual temple destruction, but it is first-hand evidence for the existence of the Hindu claim on the Babri Masjid site well before the 19th century. Only when this type of evidence was shown, did the pro-BMAC polemists move on to demand strictly contemporary evidence.

About this demand for eye-witness accounts, Arun Shourie has remarked: Today a contemporary account is being demanded in the case of the Babri Masjid. Are those who make this demand prepared to accept this as the criterion - that if a contemporary account exists of the destruction of a temple for constructing a mosque, the case is made? Shourie goes on to quote from Aurangzebs court chronicles: News came to Court that in accordance with the Emperors command his officers had demolished the temple of Vishvanath at Benares (2/9/1669) In this month of Ramzan, the religious-minded Emperor ordered the demolition of the temple at Mathura In a short time by the great exertions of his officers the destruction of this strong centre of infidelity was accomplished... A grand mosque was built on its site... (January 1670)²⁰ These accounts are as contemporary as you can get.

Shourie concludes: If the fact that a contemporary account of the temple at Ayodhya is not available leaves the matter unsettled, does the fact that contemporary accounts are available for the temples at Kashi, Mathura, Pandharpur and a host of other places settle the matter? One has only to ask the question to know that the experts and intellectuals will immediately ask for something else.²¹

11.6. The anti-temple evidence

The BMAC presented a pile of some eighty documents, which can be divided into three groups: legal documents, statements of opinion, and historical documents.

The largest group consists of court documents, from court disputes over the Rama-Janmabhoomi and other contentious places in Ayodhya, most of them from the British period, a few from after independence. However, what these court documents prove is:

Firstly, that the Hindus kept on claiming the site in principle, even if for the time being they were willing to settle for a licence to worship on a platform just outside the contentious building;

Secondly, that the Muslim pleas always focused, not on questioning the temple destruction tradition, but on the accomplished fact that they had owned the place for centuries, long enough to *create* an ownership title no matter how and from whom they had acquired it;

And thirdly, that the British rulers did not want any raking-up of old quarrels, and therefore upheld the status-quo, but without questioning the common belief that the Masjid had replaced a Hindu temple.

British judges have explicitly not subscribed to the thesis, now defended by the BMAC and the BMMCC, that there had never been a Hindu temple on the contentious spot. On the contrary, in his verdict in 1886 a British judge observed: It is unfortunate that a mosque should have been built on land held specially sacred by the Hindus, but as that happened 356 years ago, it is now too late to remedy the grievance.²² So, the court verdicts that upheld the Muslim claim to the site (and have been cited by the BM-AC scholars to this effect), by no means imply that the judges doubted the contention that a temple had been demolished to make way for this mosque. All the British sources, such as Edward Balfour in 1858 and Archaeological Survey of India's field explorer A. Fuhrer in 1891, confirm the tradition that the Babri Masjid had replaced a Rama temple.

One British source, Francis Buchanans survey (written in 1810 and edited by Montgomery Martin in 1838), has been quoted by pro-BMAC historians (who have otherwise dismissed British testimonies as

prejudiced, part of a British tactic to foment communalism etc.) as calling the tradition of the Rama-Janmabhoomi temple destruction very ill-founded.²³ However, Buchanan did not denounce as ill-founded the temple-destruction theory, as the BMAC historians claim, but only referred to the fact that the destruction is very generally attributed by the Hindus to the furious zeal of *Aurangzeb*, which allegation was misdirected: as proof for Aurangzebs non-involvement Buchanan cites the inscription attributing the mosque to Babar.²⁴ As the last large-scale temple-destroyer, Aurangzeb had become the proverbial representative of the old Islamic tradition of iconoclasm, which had already destroyed thousands of temples before his own time.

Buchanan opines that Babar had built the mosque not on empty land, but on the site of the Ramkot castle, which to him may well have been the very castle in which Rama himself had lived. This claim only differs from the local tradition and the VHP position by being even bolder. According to him, the black-stone pillars (with Hindu sculptures defaced by the bigot Babar) incorporated in the Masjid had been taken from the ruins of the palace, and at any rate from a Hindu building. Obviously, the site was considered by the devotees as Ramas court, originally a castle and only later a temple.²⁵

At any rate, the quarrel over whether the Babri Masjid replaced a castle or a temple is a false problem, considering Ramas double-role as a God-King. Buchanan gives no facts supporting an alternative origin for the Babri Masjid, and upholds the essence of the local tradition, viz. that the Masjid has replaced a Hindu building.²⁶ The British judges have consistently accepted the view of the British surveyors and scholars.

The second largest group of BMAC documents consisted of book excerpts and newspaper articles, mere statements of opinion. They give the well-known or at least predictable opinions of politicians like Jawaharlal Nehru and Ramaswamy Naicker, of secularist journalists like Arvind N. Das and Praful Bidwai, of Marxist intellectuals like the JNU historians and Prof. R.S. Sharma (who was invited to lead the BMAC team only after this first round). In this collection of opinions, essentially four points have been argued:

Firstly, Rama was not a historical character;

Secondly, Rama may have been a historical character, but Ayodhya is not his real birthplace;

Thirdly, Rama worship in Ayodhya is fairly recent, and hardly existed prior to the period when the Babri Masjid was built;

Fourthly, the Babri Masjid was not built in forcible replacement of a Rama temple.

However, the cited opinions on each of these four points are not even convergent or in mutual agreement. For instance, several authors say that the Babri Masjid was built on empty land; others say it replaced a Buddhist stupa; yet others say it replaced a Jaina temple, or a Shaiva temple, or a secular building. About Ramas birthplace, one source cited says Rama was born in Nepal; another says it was in Afghanistan; yet another says it was in Ayodhya, but on a different spot; one writer says that Rama was in fact a pharaoh of Egypt. in all, the BMAC has given proof that Rama was born at 8 different places.

Methodologically speaking, these documents do not form a body of evidence supporting one hypothesis. The BMAC has merely collected all kinds of opinions which happen to be in conflict with the thesis that the Masjid replaced a Rama temple, without minding that these opinions are also in conflict with each other. Of course, this collection of contemporary, often politically motivated articles and statements does not have any proof value. At best, some of the names under the articles could constitute an argument of authority, but even that is diluted by their juxtaposition with political agitators and plain cranks. More than an argumentation, this presentation of many conflicting opinions is a dispersionary tactic to keep the opposing party busy with refuting the weirdest viewpoints.

An important feature of the collected pro-BMAC opinions is that they have in fact limited themselves to an attempt to discredit the evidence cited in favour of the Rama-Janmabhoomi tradition. They have not given any evidence (valid or otherwise) at all for an alternative scenario that explains the presence of the Babri Masjid and the well-attested Hindu opposition

against it. They have tried to explain away the Janmabhoomi tradition by means of a conspiracy theory: as the outcome of a 19th century rumour campaign by the British rulers, out to divide and rule.²⁷ In fact, such a rumour campaign is totally unheard of in the well-documented history of British India, and would have left testimonies which the pro-BMAC historians have not been able to produce.²⁸ It is an *ad hoc* hypothesis based on nothing but the fond belief that Indias communal problem is a British creation and not the necessary result of any religious doctrine of hostility towards alternative forms of worship.²⁹

The only seemingly valid point scored by some of the BMAC sympathizers cited in the BMAC evidence bundle, is the *argumentum e silentio* that the temple destruction is not mentioned in near-contemporary sources, notably Abul Fazls *Ain-i-Akbari* and the poems of Tulsidas. However, neither Abul Fazl nor Tulsidas have written catalogues of demolished temples or even just devoted some pointed attention to the buildings of the cities mentioned in their works: they are simply not the sources that are supposed to carry the required information. Also, they are not really contemporary with Babar, but with his grandson Akbar (around 1600 A.D.).³⁰ For them too, the temple destruction was history, and the Babri Masjid just one of the thousands of mosques built on demolished Hindu temples.

The third part of the evidence bundle for the Babri Masjid side, is the historical evidence properly speaking. It consists of three pieces.

One is the text of the inscriptions on the Babri Masjid and its gate, declaring that the mosque was built in 1528 by Mir Baqi, who worked under Babars command. Of course the Hindu side has no quarrel with that: the Babri Masjid was built, so it must have been built by someone. However, in spite of the inscription, the identity of the Masjids builder happens to be disputable. It has been argued (by Sushil Srivastava and R. Nath, independently)³¹ that, judging from the architecture, the mosque must have been built during the preceding Sultanate period. Sushil Srivastava even claims that the inscription attributing the Masjid to Babar (or at least to his lieutenant Mir Baqi), is a 19th-century forgery.³² At any rate, the scenario that it was built under Babar is not in conflict with the thesis that it

was built in forcible replacement of a Rama temple. This dispute is not about who built the mosque, but about what preceded the mosque.

The second piece is Babars memoirs. In it, no mention is made of a temple demolition in Ayodhya. Unfortunately, the pages for the months when he must have been in Ayodhya and perhaps also ordered the demolition of a Hindu temple, are missing from the manuscripts. So we simply do not have Babars own report on this matter. And if Sushil Srivastava and R. Nath are right, Babar was not the builder and his testimony is irrelevant, except insofar as it might explain why the already existing mosque got attributed to him. For instance, the Afghan rulers (against whom the invader Babar fought) or the city's inhabitants may have defended Ayodhya from the Ramkot hill, so that the existing mosque got damaged in the fighting (Babar was the first one in India to use cannon), and was subsequently rebuilt by Babars men. But all this will remain speculation, because the relevant part of Babars report is missing.

The third piece of BMAC evidence is Babars testament, in which he advises his son Humayun to practise tolerance, to respect Hindu temples, and not to kill cows. This statement of religious tolerance is very nice, but unfortunately it has amply been proven to be a forgery.³³ It is quite bizarre that scholars trying to prove a point discredit their own case by using a proven forgery without any comment.

And even if Babars testament had been genuine, it would only prove that at the end of his life, Babar had got tired of the jihad which he had been waging (on top of an inter-Muslim war), or that he had come to realize that a prosperous kingdom would be better served by religious amity than by the intolerance of which he himself had given sufficient proof during his life. Babars emphatic concern for tolerance would certainly not prove that tolerance had been his way all through his life.

There are Hindu temple materials in mosques attributed to Babar in Sambhal (replacing a Vishnu temple, and dated by archaeologists to the Sultanate period, just like the Ayodhya Babri Masjid) and Pilakhana. Local tradition affirms that the Babri Masjids in Palam, Sonipat, Rohtak, Panipat, and Sirsa have replaced Brahminical or Jain temples. The contemporary *Tarikh-i-Babari* describes how Babars troops demolished many Hindu

temples at Chanderi when they occupied it. Some tough jihad rhetoric has been preserved from Babars war against the Rajputs, such as the quatrain:

*For Islams sake, I wandered in the wild,
prepared for war with unbelievers and Hindus,
resolved myself to meet a martyrs death.
Thanks be to Allah! A ghazi I became.*³⁴

It is quite plain that Babar, even when he had to fight fellow Muslims (the Afghan Lodi dynasty), never lost sight of his duty of waging war against the infidels.

So, these three documents do not prove that the Babri Masjid was built on something else than a Rama temple. The two other groups of documents are not even an attempt to give documentary or archaeological evidence, merely a collection of sympathizing statements of opinion. What is worse, the whole collection makes one wonder whether the BMAC experts had read it at all: not only are many of the documents unconvincing or beside the point, but some even support the VHP case.

Thus, a court ruling of 1951 cites testimony of local Muslims that the mosque had not been used since 1936, which means that in 1949 the Hindus took over an unused building - hardly worth the current Babri Masjid movement with its cries of Islam in danger! (or its newer version, Secularism in danger!) and its hundreds of riot victims. On 3 March 1951, the Civil Judge of Faizabad observed: it further appears from a number of affidavits of certain Muslim residents of Ayodhya that at least from 1936 onwards the Muslims have neither used the site as a mosque nor offered prayers there... Nothing has been pointed to discredit these affidavits.³⁵ Of course, even a judge may be misinformed on occasion; but at least, this is the official view, enunciated by a Court of Law constituted under Indias democratic legal system. In particular, those who have been lecturing the Hindu movement on abiding by the Constitution and respecting Court verdicts ought to show some respect for this Court verdict.

Another court document shows that the ongoing court dispute (which is the only legal obstacle to the replacement of the present structure with a proper temple) was filed well past the legal time limit. In any case, while

the BMAC wants to rule out the British Gazetteers as evidence (because they confirm that the Babri Masjid had replaced a temple), it cites court documents which reproduce excerpts from the Gazetteers as evidence and declare in so many words that Gazetteers are admissible as evidence. A number of court rulings record that Hindus relentlessly kept on claiming the site, most sacred to them, and made do with as near a site as possible under prevalent power equations: this refutes the BMAC claim that the Rama-Janmabhoomi tradition is a recent invention for political purposes, whether colonial divide and rule or Hindu communalism.

The leading political analyst Arun Shourie has commented: On reading the papers the BMAC had filed as evidence, I could only conclude, therefore, that either its leaders had not read the papers themselves, or that they had no case and had just tried to over-awe or confuse the government etc. by dumping a huge miscellaneous heap.³⁶

When asked in public forums about the results of the scholars debate, both Prof. Irfan Habib (historian at Aligarh Muslim University) and Subodh Kant Sahay (who was the Home Minister at the time of the debate) have declared that the VHP has run away from the debate. Leading newspapers have refused to publish denials of this allegations In fact, this unfounded allegation provides an interesting illustration of the psychology of lies. Liars are often not very creative, and they tend to say things that are partly inspired on the truth. Thus, Prof. Habib and Mr. Sahay are perfectly right in alleging that the debate has ended because one of the parties has run away from the debate: to that extent, their version is transparent of the truth. Only, it is not the VHP but the BMAC which has turned its back on the debate.

11.7. The anti-temple debating tactics

Meanwhile, the actual course of the debate both in the official forum and in the media could have suggested some conclusions even to non-historians (like the Supreme Court judges who refused to pronounce an opinion on it in 1994). The debate has not genuinely altered the old consensus, but it has been an interesting case-study in manipulation by unscrupled academics. That, at least, seems to be a fair description of learned publications

advertising themselves as objective studies of the controversy, but systematically concealing the arguments put forth by one of the parties.

The VHP has published its argumentation including a detailed refutation of the Babri Masjid Action Committees arguments, and like-minded scholars have published detailed presentations of specific types of evidence (e.g. Prof. Harsh Narain and Prof. R. Nath; note how the VHP, lacking a think-tank of its own, was dependent on the help of people with no prior connection to it). By contrast, the BMAC, which had the support of the Indian Council of Historical Research led by Aligarh historian Prof. Irfan Habib and of a team of scholars led by Prof. R.S. Sharma, has not felt sufficiently satisfied with its own performance in the official debate to publish its argumentation. Its numerous supporters have chosen not to refer to the debate at all and to keep the argumentation of their serious opponents out of view.

Instead, these top academics have chosen the poorest Hindutva pamphlettists as their opponents and made some, fun of cranky but irrelevant claims which go around in the semi-literate fringe of the Hindu movement. One point they like to highlight is the spurious claim that on 22 December 1949, the idols miraculously appeared in the disputed building. I do not know of anyone who would affirm that except tongue in cheek, but given that placing the idols could be construed as a criminal offence, it has nonetheless been affirmed - as an obvious ad hoc fable for purposes of self-exculpation. But note that this miracle story has long gone out of fashion: in an interview in the *New York Times*, Abbot Ram Chander Das Paramahams of an Ayodhya akhara declared openly that he was the one who had put the image inside the mosque.³⁷

Another fairly common tactic was to lump the temple argumentation with the fringe school led by P.N. Oak, which holds that every indo-Muslim building (e.g. the Taj Mahal)³⁸ was in fact a Hindu temple, not demolished but only transformed. However, this school happened to have aligned itself with the eminent historians against the VHP. Oak himself explained that the Babri Masjid itself was built by Hindus as a temple, that Babar had nothing to do with the Babri Masjid, and that neither the Moghul nor any other Muslim ruler had demolished a Hindu temple at the site.³⁹ Oaks

version of history is of a kind with the contrived scenarios thought up by the eminent historians.

Another spokesman of this school, Jeevan Kulkarni from Bombay, claimed that the Babri Masjid was a Hindu temple built by Hindus before the Muslim conquest. He even approached the Supreme Court to obtain permission to prove his point by means of thermo-luminescence and other advanced archaeological techniques, as well as an injunction to solve the dispute by preserving the building (as Muslims demand, in the mistaken belief that the building was built as a mosque) but allotting it to the Hindus to serve as the restored Rama temple which it was meant to be when it was built. Again, this school was wrongly identified with the VHP position.

A similar tactic was to associate the Ayodhya evidence with the eccentric theory of the non-historian Bal Gangadhar Tilak, later adapted by the non-historian Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar in his young days, that the Aryans came from the Arctic (Tilaks attempt to harmonize the Aryan invasion theory with traditional Vedic chronology) or that India itself had been in the Arctic zone then (Golwalkars attempt to harmonize Tilak with Aryan indigenousness).⁴⁰ These ideas are simply unrelated to the more recent history of Hindu-Muslim conflict, and are only brought into the discussion in order to strengthen the contrast between Hindu amateurishness and secularist professionalism: After R.C. Majumdar, the communal interpretation has been relegated to the world of school-level textbooks, made-easies, popular magazines, newspapers and comic strips, - meaning that the positions of prestige had been captured by Indias secularists who imposed denial of Hindu-Muslim conflict as the orthodox explanation.⁴¹ This is an argument not of authority but of status.⁴²

This way, Indias topmost academics and journalists have avoided confronting the real evidence and concentrated on attacking straw men instead. It is clearly an application of Mao Zedongs dictum: Attack where the enemy is weak, retreat where the enemy is strong. That may be a legitimate principle in warfare, but in scholarship the goal is not to score points but to establish the truth.

11.8. More on the British concoction hypothesis

The eminent JNU historians have claimed that it is in the nineteenth century that the story circulates and enters official records. These records were then cited by others as valid historical evidence on the issue.⁴³ A few years earlier, they were still far more circumspect before making this assertion. in the early days of the Ayodhya dispute, in a letter to the *Times of India*, a group of JNU academics wrote: it would be worth enquiring whether there is reliable historical evidence of a period prior to nineteenth century for this association of a precise location with the birthplace of Rama.⁴⁴

Lawyer A.G. Noorani comments on the letter: They were absolutely right. The myth is a nineteenth century creation by the British.⁴⁵ Note however that in their 1986 letter, the JNU historians had only suggested this in question format, but later many of them, like Noorani in this passage, have asserted it quite affirmatively.

Noorani then quotes a letter by Indrajit Dutta and nine others: The belief that the disputed place of worship in Ayodhya is a mosque built after destroying a temple consecrating Ramas birthplace *originates in the first half of the 19th century*. In 1813 John Leyden, a British historian, published his *Memoirs of Zehir-ed-din, Muhammad Babar, Emperor of Hindustan* (A translation of Babars memoirs in Persian). In it Leyden had contended that Babar had passed through Ayodhya in March 1528 during his campaign against the Pathans. This historical evidence of Babars presence in the area was destroyed by later British authorities to propagate the belief that the anti-Hindu Babar had destroyed the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple and got a mosque built on the spot - though Leydens work makes no mention of it. Sushil Srivastava of the Department of Medieval and Modern History, University of Allahabad, has worked extensively on the history of Avadh. He substantiates his findings to show how the British authorities, specifically Colonel Sleeman, then resident of Lucknow, anxious to justify the annexation of Avadh, exploited this controversy superbly at a time when rumblings of the 1857 mutiny were ominous.⁴⁶

Remark the illogical claim that the British destroyed the document cited by Leyden to substantiate his hypothesis (and the local tradition) that Babar had passed through the town of Ayodhya, when that very document and that

very hypothesis would support the theory that Babar destroyed a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, precisely the theory which the ten signatories try to unmask as a British concoction. The claim that the British deliberately destroyed this or any other historical evidence is also unsupported by any evidence.

This is all the more serious considering the fact that the British archives provide a much more complete testimony of the British policies than anything from the earlier periods, and considering the ten signatories own contention that their friend Sushil Srivastava has made a detailed study of the British machinations in Avadh. There is little doubt that the British resident was implementing policies designed to bring Avadh under British control, but what is very much in doubt (at any rate totally unsubstantiated) is the claim that he used temple history concoctions to that end.

There is actually some evidence to the opposite effect. P. Carnegy wrote in 1970 that up to 1855 both Hindus and Muslims worshipped at the mosque, which led to a lot of friction, until the British separated them: It is said that up to that time [viz. the Hindu-Muslim clashes in the 1850s] the Hindus and Mohamedans alike used to worship in the mosque-temple. Since the British rule a railing has been put up to *prevent dispute*, within which, in the mosque the Mohamedans pray, while outside the fence the Hindus have raised a platform on which they make their offerings.⁴⁷ As Peter Van der Veer comments on Carnegys testimony, against the British concoction hypothesis: The suggestion that the local tradition is entirely invented by the British thus seems disingenuous.⁴⁸

To quote Van der Veer in full: The implication here is that the British found the facts that fitted their master narrative of the perpetual hostility between Hindus and Muslims. () One of the problems with the above argument is that the British were not very interested in the Hindu history of Ayodhya. The most important British archaeologist of India in the nineteenth century was Alexander Cunningham. He did come to Ayodhya, not to dig up evidence of Hindu-Muslim enmity but to look for the Buddhist monuments of Saketa/ Ayodhya - monuments that nobody locally was interested in, then or now. Patrick Carnegy, the commissioner, argued that the pillars of the mosque - which are now ascribed to a Hindu temple by

[B.B.] Lal and others - strongly resemble Buddhist pillars, although he did accept the local tradition that Babar built his mosque on the birthplace temple. However, he also accepted the local tradition that Hindus and Muslims used to worship together in this mosque-temple until the disturbances of 1855. The suggestion that the local tradition is entirely invented by the British thus seems disingenuous.⁴⁹

Many 19th-century scholars had a strong pro-Buddhist bias in their India studies (setting a trend which continues till today), and the first Ayodhya surveyors display the same intellectual fashion, rather than the politically more useful interest in Hindu-Muslim friction. The dozens of scholars who have floated the British concoction hypothesis are faced with a total absence of 19th-century data supporting it.

Patrick Carnegy, the first British commissioner in Faizabad and still very close in time to the episode of communal violence (1852-57) and the British take-over after the Mutiny (1857-58), would have emphasized Hindu-Muslim conflict if the British concoction hypothesis had been true. Instead, he highlights the relative Hindu-Muslim harmony which existed shortly before the time of the British take-over.

This moment of harmony may well have been exceptional and may have to be explained by the Muslim rulers need to strengthen their position against British ambitions. But at any rate it was a fact which the British would not have highlighted if they had wanted to base their divide-and-rule policy on false history of Hindu-Muslim conflict. Moreover, if they had wanted to use historical cases of Hindu-Muslim tension to foment more such tension in their own day; they could have invoked numerous certified instances rather than having to invent any.

11.9. Archaeological evidence

The only serious comment on the VHP evidence bundle published in the national press (but still not reporting the outcome of the evidence debate) was a derogatory piece by Bhupendra Yadav in *The Tribune*. In his despair at finding that proven secularists, like R. Nath and B.B. Lal, are now nodding assent to the argument for Ram Janmabhoomi, Yadav does try to propose an alternative to the temple destruction scenario. Acknowledging

Lals archaeological finding of 11th-century temple foundations underneath the Babri Masjid, he comes up with the following explanation: After they occupied Ayodhya in 1194 AD, the Turkish sultans found a vacant mound at Ramkot in which lay buried the burnt pillar bases. The sultans encouraged settlements of Muslims on the mound (...) To help these Muslims pray, officials of the Babar regime built a mosque in 1528 AD.⁵⁰

Bhupendra Yadav's nice little scenario is of course purely hypothetical and unsupported by any document whatsoever, but that doesn't seem to trouble him. At any rate, after the cream of India's secularist historians have used all their resources to create a semblance of credibility for the no-temple case, all that Bhupendra Yadav can come up with, is the hypothesis that: 1) the Hindus of Ayodhya had left the geographical place of honour in the middle of their city vacant, unlike the people of every other city in the whole world; 2) they had laid the foundations (the pillar-bases of burnt brick) for a pillared building which they never constructed, and waited for others to come and put these foundations to proper use. This hypothesis is pretty farfetched. But at least Mr. Yadav has the merit of explicating what most people who deny the temple destruction scenario only claim by implication.

A similar howler was launched by archaeologist D. Mandal of Allahabad University in his booklet *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition* (1993). In the first week of July 1992, a team of eight reputed archaeologists, including former ASI directors Dr. Y.D. Sharma and Dr. K.M. Srivastava, had paid a visit to the Ramkot hill in Ayodhya. They went there to verify and evaluate the findings done by labourers who had been clearing the area around the Babri Masjid on orders of the Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism. The findings included religious sculptures, among them a statue of Vishnu (of whom Rama is considered an incarnation), and a lot of rubble thrown together in a deep cavity in front of the Babri Masjid structure. Team members said the inner boundary of the disputed structure rests, at least on one side, on an earlier existing structure, which may have belonged to an earlier temple.⁵¹ They pleaded for a more systematic survey of the entire hill.

However, Mandal dismisses the post-demolition (and pre-demolition)⁵² archaeological evidence for the temple as invalid because not unearthed in a scientific excavation: they cannot be placed in context since the stratigraphical evidence is destroyed by arbitrary digging or willful destruction.⁵³ By that criterion, much of Egyptian and Harappan history should also be nullified retroactively. Even a few decades ago, archaeological methods were unscientific by present-day standards, and the older findings were therefore not as transparent in terms of stratigraphy and chronology as desirable, yet the artifacts found were still real and did allow for certain conclusions even if less compelling or precise.

Moreover, Mandal seems to be trying to over-awe the lay reader with a distinction between strata which is very important in digging at prehistorical sites but becomes far less crucial in more recent sites, where the objects found are known in context because a lot of written evidence attests to their use and meaning and chronology. When you find different types of prehistoric stone tools, proper stratigraphy is essential if you want to know their chronological sequence. But when you find (a) a paleolithic flintstone scraper, (b) a medieval metal saw, and (c) a modern electrical sawing-machine, you can safely deduce that (a) precedes (b) which in turn precedes (c), even if the stratigraphy of the site had been messed up. Likewise, it is not difficult to distinguish Hindu art from Muslim art. It would be for a Martian who knows neither religion, but not for us who are familiar with both religions and their art histories.

Unlike findings at pre-literate sites from unknown cultures, the objects in Ayodhya were certainly found in context. For starters, they were Hindu objects found at a site where, after centuries of Hindu presence, a mosque had been built. Even if stratigraphically less than perfect, the fact of this multifarious evidences existence, certified by a number of leading archaeologists, is undeniable.

Mandal also tries to impose a contrived explanation on Prof. B.B. Lal's old pillar-bases evidence, claiming that these pillar-bases were certainly not contemporaneous with one another nor even components of a single structure.⁵⁴ This would mean that every now and then, these inconsistent Hindus or Muslims just made a hole in the ground, arbitrarily planted a

pillar-base somewhere, never to build a pillar on it, then forgot about it till a few decades later, another joker repeated this meaningless ritual, coincidentally yielding an orderly pattern of pillar-bases. This is secularist archaeology for you.

Another strange line of argument which Mandal uses, is this: he first claims that a demolition must have involved the use of fire, then notes that neither are there traces of burning, expected when military destruction occurs.⁵⁵ Now, apart from the fact that fire would mostly affect the overground parts while we are only left with the underground remainder, the point is that no one insists that the temple was destroyed by fire. Numerous mosques stand on Hindu temples which were demolished alright without being burnt down. Indeed, any Kar Sevak could have told Prof. Mandal that there are other ways to demolish a building. Could it be that Mandal is only refuting his own straw-man hypotheses because he cannot face the real evidence?

For the rest, he repeats the worn-out trick of using the non-mentioning of certain facts in B.B. Lals *brief* (i.e. by definition incomplete) report to contradict B.B. Lals and S.P. Guptas recent revelations of findings which would only appear in the full report.⁵⁶ The fact of the matter is that the full report of B.B. Lals findings was withheld from publication, and that the brief report which the journalists had seen explicitly refrains from giving details of the medieval findings. It is quite odd to use the brief version of the report to disprove the detailed version of the *same* reports relevant part which B.B. Lal himself had just made public.⁵⁷

That the full report is still unpublished, is most likely because the secularist authorities objected to its findings. As Peter Van der Veer reported: However, in this case the government has not allowed the Department of Archaeology to provide evidence. it has thus fallen to B.B. Lal to do so.⁵⁸

The same counts for the inscription found during the demolition, which clearly mentions that the site was considered Ramas birthplaces.⁵⁹ At the time, many academics declared without any examination that the inscription, presented by scholars of no lesser stature than themselves, was

a forgery. Thus, according to a group of historians and scholars including Kapil Kumar, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, K.M. Shrimali, Suvira Jaiswal and S.C. Sharma, the so-called discoveries of artefacts during and after the demolition were a planned fabrication and a fraud perpetrated, to further fundamentalist designs.^{[60](#)}

If the secularists had really believed this, they would have requested access to the findings, which would readily have been granted by the minister in charge, the militant secularist Arjun Singh. They would have invited international scholars as witnesses, and curtly demonstrated its falseness for all to see. instead, just like B. B. Lals report, this inscription became a skeleton in their closet, which they have to keep from public view as long as possible.

In fact, the BMAC and secularist side has frequently opposed archaeological research at the site, while the Hindu side wanted more of it, e.g.: Nevertheless, in a BBC interview in 1991, [B.B.] Lal argued that there had been a Hindu temple for Rama/Vishnu on the spot now occupied by the mosque and that pillars of that temple had been used in constructing the [Masjid]. Lal suggested that further digging should be carried out in order to come up with more evidence - a suggestion that was denounced in the press by the historian Irfan Habib and others as a ploy to demolish the mosque.^{[61](#)}

The whole anti-temple argumentation has nothing more to offer than such pitiable attempts to wriggle out from under the weight of inconvenient evidence. Only media power has so far saved the eminent historians and their ilk from being exposed.

11.10. The Shariat does not allow temple demolition

Soft-line Hindu nationalists like K.R. Malkani, along with some secularists and Muslims, have often tried to convince us that Islam itself opposes the demolition of non-Muslim places of worship. They even argue that a mosque built on a demolished Hindu temple would be unlawful under Islamic law. The authority claimed as basis for this offer is the injunction in the *Fatawa-i-Alamgiri* (Aurangzebs codex of applied Islamic jurisprudence): it is not permissible to build a mosque on unlawfully

acquired land. There may be many forms of unlawful acquisition. For instance, if some people forcibly take somebodys house and build a mosque or even a *jama masjid* on it, then *namaz* in such a mosque will be against the *shariat*.

Without reference to the context, this might be read as a prohibition on forcibly replacing Hindu temples with mosques. Sushil Srivastava has even used this injunction as proof that mosques simply cannot have been built in forcible replacement of temples. He writes that the Quran clearly states that prayers offered in a contentious place will not be accepted () Thus, the whole purpose of constructing a *masjid* on the site of a *mandir* would be self-defeating () it is highly unlikely that even the contentious mosques in Varanasi and Mathura are located on the *exact* sites of temples.⁶²

The Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi is very certainly located on the exact site of the Vishvanath temple, and visibly includes remains of the old temple walls. Numerous other examples can be cited from inside and outside of India, and more cases keep on being discovered.⁶³ To mention two less-known cases from Iran, the Masjid-i-Biruñ in Abarquh and the Jami Masjid of Aqda (still a Zoroastrian centre of pilgrimage with a shrine in use on a mountain outside the town), whose origin may be traced back to fire-temples of the Zoroastrians.⁶⁴ The author reporting on them correctly introduces his finding thus: In the Islamic world many places of worship belonging to the earlier religion have been converted to mosques.

As is clear from the Islamic law books, and as Prof. Harsh Narain has shown, the injunction against building mosques on unlawfully acquired land only applies to inter-Muslim disputes, because it was quite lawful and in fact also quite common to have mosques built on temple sites grabbed from Hindus and other heathens.⁶⁵ Indeed, the forcible takeover of non-Muslim religious places is a practice initiated by Prophet Mohammed himself. The best example of the practice is the Kaaba itself, a Pagan shrine forcibly transformed into the central mosque of Islam.

11.11. Tampering with the evidence

In its presentation of evidence in the Government sponsored scholars debate in December 1990, the VHP scholars have pointed out 4 cases of attempted fraud by their opponents, attempts by BMAC sympathizers to conceal, obliterate or change evidence: removing relevant old books from libraries, adding words on an old map. Recent editions of Urdu books (by Maulvi Abdul Karim and by Shaikh Md. Azamat Ali Nami) have suppressed chapters or passages relating the temple destruction on Ramkot hill which were present in earlier editions or in the manuscript. In an English translation of a book by Maulana Hakim Saiyid Abdul Hai, the relevant passages present in the Urdu original had been censored out, and an effort was discovered to remove all the copies of the Urdu original from the libraries.

On maps included in the Settlement Record of 1861, which describe the disputed area as *Janamsthan*, birthplace, someone had added Babri Masjid; the interpolation was obvious after comparison with a copy of the document kept in another office. The fact that this official document could be tampered with, may well be related to the fact that the then Revenue Minister of Uttar Pradesh was an office-bearer of the BMAC.

In my opinion, these petty and clumsy attempts to tamper with the corpus of evidence, are childs play compared with the concealment of evidence by professional scholars sympathetic to the Babri Masjid cause. In their publications on this dispute, A.A. Engineer and Prof. S. Gopal have simply kept all the inconvenient (mainly pre-British) testimonies out of the picture, and just acted as if these did not exist. In his reply to the anti-Janmabhoomi statement *The Political Abuse of History* by 25 historians of JNU, Prof. A.R. Khan shows grounds to accuse *the eminent JNU historians* of not only concealment but also distortion of evidence.⁶⁶

It is not unfair to conclude that some of the pro-BMAC authors have committed serious breaches of academic deontology. For me personally, seeing this shameless overruling of historical evidence with a high-handed use of academic and media power, was the immediate reason to involve myself in this controversial question.

When A.K. Chatterjee had presented the testimony by 18-century traveller Father Tieffenthaler as evidence, Syed Shahabuddin revealed in his

reply that he possessed a copy of this text (in German translation) and that he was thoroughly familiar with the text.⁶⁷ This seems to imply that while he was challenging his opponents to come up with any pre-British evidence, he was fully aware that such evidence did exist (or at the very least a document which might reasonably be claimed to contain such evidence, even if one were to be persuaded by Shahabuddins extremely contrived attempt to explain it away), but remained sitting on top of it in the hope that nobody would discover it.

The above are cases where the attempts to suppress evidence have failed. It is quite probable that other attempts have succeeded. There may well be documents containing pertinent information, particularly about the sites history during the Sultanate period (1206-1525), which have escaped the notice of Prof. Harsh Narain (the only scholar of Persian and Arabic in the VHP team) because they had been removed in time from the places where they could normally be found. Such documents would mostly be in Persian and available only in the libraries of Muslim institutions. In some of these, Prof. Harsh Narain has effectively been denied access as soon as his involvement in the Ayodhya argument became known. How many pieces of pertinent material have been concealed, removed, destroyed or altered is anybodys guess.

11.12. Conclusion

The clear-cut result of the Ayodhya evidence debate is still not widely known. Most of the Indian English-language papers, as well as the official electronic media, have all along been on the side of the BMAC, and they have strictly kept the lid on this information. Their reporting on the scholars debate has been very partial and, from the moment the BMACs defeat became clear, increasingly vague.

If any proof is needed that the BMAC has been defeated in this debate, it is this: no one sympathetic to the Babri Masjid cause has made any reference to the outcome of this debate all through the subsequent years, even though the Ayodhya issue frequently reappeared in the news. Politicians have made a show of their secularism and their opposition to religious fanaticism by organizing fact-finding missions to Ayodhya and issuing statements on the dispute, but they have not made any reference to the outcome of the

scholars debate at all. When reading about the subsequent course of the Ayodhya controversy, one might get the impression that the scholars debate never took place.

However, it did take place, and it has yielded sufficient evidence to consider the matter as practically closed. The Babri Masjid was built in forcible replacement of a Hindu temple. With the historical question decided, that leaves only the political question to be resolved.

That political question has not been the topic of this paper, but for those who care to know, I may briefly state my position. The Rama-Janmabhoomi site has been a Hindu sacred site since many centuries. Even the JNU historians admit that it was a pilgrimage site since the 13th century. It may have been one since much earlier, but alright: Catholic pilgrimage sites like Lourdes and Fatima are not even two centuries old and still they are respected. So, seven centuries is quite sufficient to certify its status of sanctity. Today, judges and governments in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas are increasingly conceding the right of indigenous communities to restart worship at their sacred sites. Considering the human right to freedom of religion, it is obvious that communities have a right to their sacred sites, and no modern and humane person would ever countenance thwarting this right for other than the most compelling reasons.

So, it is completely evident that Hindus have a right to use and properly adorn their own sacred sites, including Rama-Janmabhoomi at Ayodhya. The problem with Ayodhya, the cause of all this rioting and waste of lives and political energy, is not that Hindus want to adorn their own sacred site with proper temple architecture: that is the most normal thing in the world. The problem is that another party, the Islamist-Christian-Marxist combine in India, is trying to obstruct this perfectly unobjectionable project of architectural renovation. Against the near-universal consensus that all sacred sites are to be respected, Islam is taking the position that it has the right to occupy and desecrate the sacred sites of other religions. Genuine secularists must oppose and thwart this obscurantist design, and allow the normal process of Hindu architectural renovation to take its course.

Footnotes:

¹*Koenraad Elst: The Ayodhya debate, in Gilbert Pollet, ed.: Indian Epic Values. Rāmāyana and Its Impact, Peeters, Leuven 1995. As is all too common with conference proceedings, this book was assembled only three years after the conference, so the published version of my paper was finalized only in 1994.*

²*In the 1961 Faizabad Gazetteer, Mrs. E.B. Joshi, while not yet denying the traditional account relayed in the earlier Gazetteers, suppresses it without giving any reason for doing so, probably on orders of the Government of India under Jawaharlal Nehru. But neutral scholarly publications like the 1989 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (entry Ayodhya) confirm the temple destruction scenario.*

³*One of the first scholarly publications on the dispute was my Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid, A Case Study in Hindu-Muslim Conflict (Voice of India, Delhi, July 1990), partly a reply to the statement The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid/Rama Janmabhumi Controversy, by Bipin Chandra and 24 other historians of Jawaharlal Nehru University. A large part of my book has been included in Vinay Chandra Mishra and Parmanand Singh, eds.: Ram Janmabhoomi Babri Masjid, Historical Documents, Legal Opinions & Judgments, Bar Council of India Trust, Delhi 1991.*

⁴*The VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, World Hindu Council) was founded in 1964 by Guru Golwalkar, chief of the Rashtriya Swayarvek Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Corps) as an instrument for the spread of Hindu culture and religion. It takes its guidelines from an assembly of traditional religious leaders.*

⁵*Prof. B.B. Lal has formulated this conclusion on different occasions, including articles in Purātitattva no. 16, 1987, and in Manthan, October 1990. In a letter to the Times of India, published on 1-3-1991, he concludes that what is known as Ayodhya today was indeed the Ayodhya of the Valmiki Ramayana.*

⁶Prof. Kamal Salibi of Beirut has proposed the theory that all the Biblical sites including Abrahams Hebron and king Davids Jerusalem, were situated in the Hejaz area of Western Arabia (in his 1985 book *The Bible Came from Arabia: a Radical Reinterpretation of Old Testament Geography*). The double political motivation is obvious: undermining Israels historical legitimacy and giving a foundation to Islams claim to an Abrahamic heritage including the Kaaba. Established Bible scholars have dismissed this theory as wishful thinking.

⁷The Ayodhya dispute and the Rushdie affair are indeed connected. The ban on *The Satanic Verses* was part of a package of concessions by the Rajiv Gandhi Government to calm down Syed Shahabuddin, who had threatened a Muslim march on Ayodhya on the same day when the VHP would hold a rally there.

⁸Quoted for rebuttal from Shahabuddins own monthly *Muslim India* by Harsh Narain in his article *Ram Janmabhoomi: Muslim Testimony*, published in the Lucknow Pioneer (5-2-90) and in Indian Express (26-2-90), and included in S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.1, 2nd ed., *Voice of India*, Delhi 1998. In the ensuing debate between Prof. Narain, Mr. A.K. Chatterjee and Syed Shahabuddin, the latter has never denied nor cancelled his offer.

⁹Prof. R.S. Sharma: *Communal History and Ramas Ayodhya*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi 1990.

¹⁰R.S. Sharma et al.: *Ramjanmabhumi Babri Masjid, A Historians Report to the Nation*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi 1991, p.4.

¹¹The VHP evidence bundle, its rebuttal of the BMAC argumentation, a press brief, and some articles generally supporting the VHP viewpoint, have been published as *History versus Casuistry, Evidence of the Ramajanmabhoomi Mandir presented by the Vishva Hindu Parishad to the Government of India in December-January 1990-91*, *Voice of India*, Delhi 1991. Most of it was also included in *Sita Ram*

Goel: Hindu Temples, vol. 1, at least in its 2nd edition, Voice of India, Delhi 1998. The BMAC evidence bundle has not been published.

[12](#)Will Durant: *Story of Civilization*, vol. 1, New York 1972, p.459.

[13](#)*This incorporation of Hindu temple materials in mosques is cynically held up as a showpiece of composite culture and a living evidence of secularism by the friends of Islam such as Congress MP Mani Shankar Aiyar, cited to this effect by Swapan Dasgupta, Sunday, 10-5-1992.*

[14](#)*A testimony to the same effect is also given by the Portuguese historian Gaspar Correa, who describes how Hindus continued their annual procession to the site of the Kapalishwara temple on Mylapore beach (Madras), even after the temple had been forcibly replaced with a Catholic church, vide Ishwar Sharan: *The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*, Voice of India, p.18-19 (1st ed., 1991) or p-93-94 (2nd ed., 1995).*

[15](#)*A.G. Noorani: *The Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Question* (originally published in Economic and Political Weekly), in A.A. Engineer ed.: *Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy*, AJanta, Delhi 1990, p.66.*

[16](#)*Mirza Jan: *Hadiqa-i Shahada* (The garden of martyrdom), Lucknow 1856, included in the VHP evidence bundle: History vs. Casuistry, Voice of India, Delhi 1991, p.14.*

[17](#)*Indian Express, 13-3-1990.*

[18](#)*A.K. Chatterjee: *Ram Janmabhoomi: some more evidence*, Indian Express, 27-3-1990. It is included, with the whole ensuing polemical exchange with Syed Shahabuddin, as appendix 4 in *History versus Casuistry*.*

[19](#)*The title of the princesss text is given as *Sahifa-i Chahal Nasaih Bahadur Shahi* (Persian: Letter of the Forty Advices of Bahadur Shah).*

It is included in the VHP evidence bundle: History vs. Casuistry, p. 13-14.

²⁰Percival Spear has the effrontery to declare: Aurangzebs supposed intolerance is little more than a hostile legend (*Penguin History of India*, vol.2, p.56). The contemporary records show Aurangzeb as a pious man who faithfully practised his religion and therefore persecuted the unbelievers and destroyed their temples by the thousands. About the denial of Islamic crimes against humanity, vide Sita Ram Goel: *Story of Islamic Imperialism in India*, *Voice of India*, Delhi 1984.

²¹A. Shourie: *Take over from the experts*, syndicated column, included in *History versus Casuistry* as appendix 1, and in A. Shourie: *Indian Controversies*, ASA, Delhi 1992, p.411-418.

²²Quoted by the VHP-mandated experts in their rejoinder to the BMAC: *History vs. Casuistry*, p.61.

²³This text does not figure in the original BMAC evidence bundle, but its words very ill-founded are quoted by Prof. Irfan Habib in a speech to the Aligarh Historians Group (12/2/1992, published in *Muslim India*, 5/1991). The paragraph containing these words (but not the entire relevant passage) is quoted by R.S. Sharma, M. Athar Ali, D.N. Jha and Suraj Bhan, the historians for the BMAC, in their joint publication: *Ramjanmabhumi Babri Masjid, A Historians Report to the Nation*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi, May 1991, p.20-21.

²⁴Cited in Harsh Narain: *The Ayodhya Temple/Mosque Dispute*, Penman, Delhi 1993, p.8, emphasis added. Father Joseph Tieffenthaler records that the temple destruction was being attributed to Aurangzeb by some, to Babar by others, but this minor confusion never affected the consensus that the mosque had forcibly replaced a Hindu temple.

²⁵In 1608, William Finch (quoted in the VHP evidence bundle: *History vs. Casuistry*, p. 19) had witnessed the ruins of Ramkot, i.e. of the Hindu temple which kept alive the tradition that that very site had once been Ramas castle. The entire hill was called Ramkot, Ramas

castle, and the temple complex was certainly larger than the Babri Masjid, so that Finch may well have seen some leftovers still standing there beside the mosque.

26 *Francis Buchanans report has been put into perspective by Mr. A.K. Chatterjee, in an article intended as an episode of his Ayodhya debate with Syed Shahabuddin on the opinion page of the Indian Express, sent on 14-8-1990 but not published; but included in History versus Casuistry, appendix 4.*

27 *For instance, Syed Shahabuddin blames propaganda by the British (Indian Express, 12-5-1990), and according to Md. Abdul Rahim Qureshi, secretary of the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, the Britishers... planted false stories and succeeded in misleading the masses to believe that Babri Masjid stood in the premises of a Rama temple which was demolished by Babar (Indian Express, 13-3-1990).*

28 *For a rebuttal of the British conspiracy hyothesis, vide K. Elst: Party-line history-writing, The Pioneer (Lucknow edition), 19/20-12-1990, reproduced in History vs. Casuistry, app.6.*

29 *It should be borne in mind that the Quran contains dozens of injunctions to wage war against the unbelievers, e.g.: Make war on them until idolatry is no more and Allahs religion reigns supreme (2:193 and 8:39); Those who follow Mohammed are merciless to the unbelievers but kind to one another (48:29); Enmity and hate shall reign between us until ye believe in Allah alone (60:4), etc. The same attitude is found in the jihad chapters of the Hadis collections and the Islamic law codices. In Indian history, these verses and the precedent set by the Prophet have been systematically invoked to justify persecutions and temple demolitions.*

30 *A.G. Noorani (A.A. Engineer ed.: Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy, p.65) claims that Tulsidas was over thirty in 1528 when the mosque was built. He lived and wrote his great work [the Rama-Charit Manas] in Ayodhya. In fact, he wrote it in Varanasi, on what is*

now called *Tulsi Ghat*, and he died in 1623, which means that he was born after 1528.

³¹Sushil Srivastava: *The Disputed Mosque*, Vistaar Publ., Delhi 1991, ch.5; R. Nath: *The Babari Masjid of Ayodhya, Historical Research Documentation Programme*, Jaipur 1991. The latter has clearly stated that this revision of who built the Masjid, in no way invalidates the claim that it had replaced a Hindu temple: I have been to the site and have had occasion to study the mosque, privately, and I have absolutely no doubt that the mosque stands on the site of a Hindu temple on the north-western corner of the temple-fortress Ramkot. (letter in Indian Express, 2-1-91)

³²Srivastava (in A.A. Engineer ed.: *Babari Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy*, p.36) quotes Shamsur Rehman Farooqui, a scholar of Persian, who considers the inscription written in a younger style of calligraphy common in the 19th century, and by someone not well-versed in Persian. The latter observation may as well be explained by the fact that Babars Turkish scribes had only recently learned Persian; whereas most literate Muslims in 19th-century India were very well-versed in Persian.

³³Sri Ram Sharma: *Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors* (1940), p.24-25. The same position has been taken by Mrs. Beveridge, the translator of Babars memoirs, and other historians. Several hypotheses of who forged this testament and why are explored J.N. Tiwari and V.S. Pathak (BHU): *Rama Janmabhoomi Bhavana*. The testimony of the *Ayodhya Mahatmya*, in Lallanji Gopal, ed.: *Ayodhya, History, Archaeology and Tradition*, papers presented in the seminar held on 13-15 February 1992, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Varanasi 1994, p.282-296.

³⁴Quoted in Mrs. A.S. Beveridge: *Babur Nama*, Delhi 1970 reprint, 574-575. Ghazi has the same meaning as mujahid, though it is often used in the more precise sense of one who has effectively killed infidels with his own hands.

[35](#) Prof. B.P. Sinha claims to know how this disuse of the Masjid came about: As early as 1936-37, a bill was introduced in the legislative council of U.P. to transfer the site to the Hindus (...) the bill was withdrawn on an unwritten understanding that no namaz [be] performed. (in annexure 29 to the VHP evidence bundle, unpublished)

[36](#) A. Shourie: Take over from the experts, syndicated column, 27-1-91, included in History vs. Casuistry as appendix 1. Arun Shourie was sacked as Indian Express editor, apparently under government pressure, after revealing that, in October 1990, Prime Minister V.P. Singh had aborted his own compromise arrangement on Ayodhya under pressure from Imam Bukhari, prominent member of the BMAC.

[37](#) Cited in Peter Van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p.157, with reference to New York Times, 22-12-1991.

[38](#) Though the Taj Mahal was obviously never a Hindu temple, the story of its construction may be a bit more complicated than simply one of an original Indo-Saracen construction on virgin land, vide Marvin H. Mills (Professor of Architecture, Pratt Institute, New York): An architect looks at the Taj legend, a review of Wayne Edison Begley & Ziyauddin Ahmad Desai: Taj Mahal, the Illumined Tomb, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1989.

[39](#) Padmini Kumar: Babri: another twist to the issue!, Maharashtra Herald, 9-12-1990, based on an interview with P.N. Oak.

[40](#) B.G. Tilak: Arctic Home in the Vedas, 1903, and M.S. Golwalkar: We, Our Nationhood Defined, 1939.

[41](#) Aditya and Mridula Mukherjee: No challenge from communalists, Sunday Observer, 15-3-1992.

[42](#) It may be noted that the no-temple school is not necessarily less communalist, for it imposes explanations by religious conflict where no such conflicts existed, e.g. in his presidents address before the Panjab History Conference held at Patiala in march 1999, Against

communalising history, D.N. Jha communalizes history by repeating the myth of Saint Thomas martyrdom at the hands of Hindus as a well known fact. [note added in January 2002]

[43](#)*Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra et al.: The political abuse of history, in Asghar Ali Engineer: Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy, p.235.*

[44](#)*Letter signed by Romila Thapar, Muzaffar Alam, Bipan Chandra, R. Champaka Lakshmi, S. Bhattacharya, H. Mukhia, Suvira Jaiswal, S. Ratnagar, M.K. Palat, Satish Sabarwal, S. Gopal and Mridula Mukherjee, datelined 21-10-1986, published in Times of India, 28-10-1986.*

[45](#)*A.G.Noorani: The Babri Masjid/Ramjanmabhoomi Question, Asghar Ali Engineer: Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy, p.66.*

[46](#)*Letter in The Statesman, 22-10-1989, quoted by A.G. Noorani: The Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Question, Asghar Ali Engineer: Babari Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy, p.66-67.*

[47](#)*P. Carnegy: A Historical Sketch of Tehsil Fyzabad, Lucknow 1870, quoted by Harsh Narain: The Ayodhya Temple/Mosque Dispute, Penman, Delhi 1993, p.8-9, and by Peter Van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p.153; emphasis mine.*

[48](#)*Peter Van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p. 160.*

[49](#)*Peter Van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p. 159-160.*

[50](#)*Bhupendra Yadav: Temple issue built on weak base, in The Tribune, 7-3-1992.*

[51](#)*Indian Express, 4-7-1992.*

[52](#)*Presented in Y.D. Sharma et al.: Ramajanma Bhumi: Ayodhya. New Archaeological Discoveries, published by Prof. K.S. Lal for the*

Historians Forum, Delhi 1992. An earlier smaller find of religious artefacts on 10 March 1992 in diggings by the Uttar Pradesh tourism department was reported in the press, e.g. Anil Rana: Artifacts found near Babri Masjid, Statesman, 11-3-1992. A further discovery was made a month after the demolition, vide: New evidence at temple site found, Pioneer, 8-1-1993.

⁵³D. Mandal: *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition. A Critique of the New and Fresh Discoveries*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1993, p.xi.

⁵⁴D. Mandal: *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition*, p.63.

⁵⁵D. Mandal: *Ayodhya Archaeology after Demolition*, p.65.

⁵⁶E.g.: No Pillar-bases at Ayodhya: ASI Report, Times of India, 7-12-90, and A.G. Noorani: *The Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi question*, in A.A. Engineer: *Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy*, p.64.

⁵⁷B.B. Lal explained this matter and restated his long-held positions in his article: *Facts of history cannot be altered*, The Hindu, 1-7-1998, in reply to a slanderous editorial, *Tampering with history*, The Hindu, 12-6-1998. Undaunted, D.N. Jha attempted to restore the confusion: *We were not shown Ayodhya notebook*, The Hindu, 27-7-1998. [note added in January 2002]

⁵⁸Peter Van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism*, p-157. On several occasions, Marxist historians had insinuated that B.B. Lal, one of the greatest living archaeologists, has changed his conclusions about the pre-existent temple in order to satisfy the requirements of VHP politics (thus the JNU historians Romila Thapar, S. Gopal and K.N. Panikkar in Indian Express, 5-12-1990). Among those who came out in Prof. Lals defence and certified his statements are: K.V. Soundarajan (ASI), I. Mahadevan, R. Nath, K.V. Raman, and K. K. Mohammed (ASI, the only Muslim who participated in the Ayodhya excavations, letter in Indian Express, 15-12-1990). In a speech to the Aligarh Historians Group (12-2-1991, published in Muslim India, 5/1991), Prof. Irfan Habib has made similar personal attacks on Prof. B.R. Grover, Prof. B.P. Sinha,

Prof. K.S. Lal and Dr. S.P. Gupta, who have represented the VHP in the scholars debate, and on Prof. B.B. Lal.

⁵⁹*Presented by Dina Nath Mishra: Writing in the debris, Telegraph, 1-1-1993.*

⁶⁰*Historians pick holes in evidence, Times of India, 26-12-1992.*

⁶¹*Peter Van der Veer: Religious Nationalism, p. 1 58-159.*

⁶²*Sushil Srivastava: The Ayodhya controversy, in A.A. Engineer ed.: Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy, p.38.*

⁶³*E.g.: One night during the monsoon of 1991, the rain was so heavy that it washed away the wall that was concealing the frontage of the Bijamandal mosque raised by Aurangzeb in 1682 in Vidisha, and the broken wall exposed so many Hindu idols that the Archaeological Survey of India had no choice but to excavate, as mentioned by Prafull Goradia: Heritage hushed up, Pioneer, 12-12-2000. [note added in January 2002]*

⁶⁴*M. Shokoohy: Two fire temples converted to mosques in central Iran, Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce, EJ. Brill, Leiden 1985, p.546.*

⁶⁵*Harsh Narain: Ram Janmabhoomi: Muslim testimony, in Lucknow Pioneer (5-2-90) and Indian Express (26-2-90), included in S.R. Goel: Hindu Temples, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (1998), p. 169-175.*

⁶⁶*Prof. A.R. Khan: In the name of history (originally published in Indian Express, 25-2-1990) and the whole subsequent exchange with the JNU historians has been included in History vs. Casuistry, app.2, and in S.R. Goel: Hindu Temples, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Voice of India, Delhi 1998), p. 243-263. We have to give the JNU historians credit for trying at least this once to refute criticism, but we cannot commend the secretiveness about this exchange in their later writings. On the other hand, their secretiveness is quite eloquent in its own way.*

⁶⁷The whole debate between A.K. Chatterjee and Syed Shahabuddin is included in S.R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol.1, 2nd ed., p.176-211; Shahabuddins claim to have the German text is on p. 198.

12. About the Hindu Critique of Monotheism

This final text was written just recently, after I was given a copy of probably the first book containing a paper devoted specifically to a position taken by Voice of India, viz. its critique of monotheism. This was a central theme in the work of the late Ram Swarup and has remained so for those who have learned from him, including Sita Ram Goel and Arun Shourie, the authors specifically studied in the paper under consideration.

12.1. Portrait of the India-watcher as a young lady

In March 1998, a Miss Mitsuhiro Kondo, then a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Tokyo, visited Voice of India's publisher Sita Ram Goel for an interview. Mr. Goel has a reputation for readily grasping peoples motives and seeing through pretences, but he was quite forthcoming in freely sharing his thoughts with this unknown visitor. In any case, if you have nothing to hide, why not speak out to all corners? Many a Hindu Revivalist keeps foreign (meaning Western) interviewers at arms length, because most of them only come to collect ammunition for some defamation job. This young lady gave a more open-minded impression, which was partly justified but is also partly belied by the paper she ended up writing.

So, Mitsuhiro Kondo has written an overview of the criticisms levelled by present-day Hindu nationalists against what they call variously monotheism or Semitic religions, and to analyse the structure of their discourse as a logic of justification for hostilities. As we shall see, her paper fails to make the crucial connection between the critique and the hostilities.¹ It is an old dictators trick to associate criticism with crime and disorder, and too often we have seen secularists reduced to this sleight-of-hand of identifying rational criticism of Christianity and Islam with communal riots. She does not cite any evidence for such a connection. Has

she ever met a rioter who gave his reading of a scholarly critique as his motive for rioting? Or even one who reads books to begin with?

Her paper is included in one of those over-numerous academic books on communalism and nation-building in South Asia. As a junior scholar, she may have felt obliged to toe the line laid down by the book's editor, Prof. Mushirul Hasan, and senior contributors like Prof. Gyanendra Pandey.² Maybe she tried to please her mentors by taking a more hostile line to Hindu Revivalism than she meant to. But we only have her text in the published version, and unfortunately we find that in essential traits, it is of one piece with the usual biased discourse of the Nehruvian secularists.

12.2. Many faces of Hindu Revivalism

In spite of undeniable mistakes, Miss Kondo scores one or two notches higher than most of Indias secularists and their Western loudspeakers. Thus, she takes the trouble to note (at some length) that the term Semitic religions in this context means Christianity and Islam, but not Judaism. The recent crop of US-based Hindu-baiters are busy adapting their rhetoric to American conditions, where Jewish opinion carries a lot of weight, so they try to sow confusion around the ambiguous term Semitic: though hard-boiled pro-Islamic anti-Zionists themselves, they darkly hint that Hindu Revivalism, a long-standing ally of Israel, is somehow anti-Semitic. This new propaganda line hasn't reached Tokyo yet, or the young researcher has commendably spurned the use of such cheap tricks.

She also admits that the Hindu nationalist movement as we see it in India today is as old and deep-rooted as it is diverse in form.³ Most secularists only mention the RSS and see all other tendencies as mere tentacles of that organisation, not so much as a tactic of guilt by association but simply because they never did the mental exercise of distinguishing between the different tendencies within Hindu Revivalism. However, she loses sight of that initial distinction by lumping Sita Ram Goel and Arun Shourie with cruder variants of Hindu nationalism, e.g.: () the Indian people - or the *Hindu rashtra* (nation) as they prefer to say, - though the authors cited never use the term *Hindu Rashtra*, which is typical of Hindu Mahasabha discourse and commonly used. in RSS literature.⁴

Our Japanese scholar misses a turn rather badly when she compares Guru Golwalkars view of Islam and Christianity with that of what she calls the Goel/Shourie group. In her view, the formers positions bear a striking resemblance to, and at times are identical to those of the latter.⁵ Not quite. It is true that in criticizing Christianity and Islam, Golwalkar *sometimes* managed to address the question of the false truth claims on which these belief systems are based, as Goel and Shourie have consistently tried to do. But most of the time, Golwalkar (and even more so the RSS as such and most of its office-bearers) has gone on questioning the loyalty of Christians and Muslims, hammering at their foreign origins and anti-national tendencies. He never busied himself with informing the Indian public about the findings of modern scholarship which undermine the core beliefs of Christianity and Islam, as Goel and Shourie have done in a respectable number of hefty volumes.

Therefore, it is the very opposite of the truth to deduce that the common structure between these two ideological currents [viz. Golwalkar and Goel/Shourie], separated by several decades as they are, highlights the core of the Hindu nationalist movement: ethnicism or exclusive particularism.⁶ And it is likewise untrue that Goel and Shourie are playing a role within a grand Hindutva strategy, viz. as Gamekeeper of the hard-line position of ethnic exclusivism.⁷

In sharp contrast with the repetitive-nationalistic and Indocentric approach of Golwalkar and the RSS, Goel and Shourie (and Ram Swarup before them) have developed a historical and philosophical critique of Christianity and Islam that has universal validity. It is part of continuum with Western and other foreign critiques of the said religions. The belief that Prophet Mohammed heard Allahs very own message, or that Jesus was Gods only-begotten son who freed mankind from sin by his death and resurrection, remains false regardless of whether you study the matter in India or in Europe. The finding that Christians are using many means fair and foul in order to convert Hindus, or that Muslims have destroyed numerous Hindu temples, remains true regardless of whether you study the data in a dusty Hindu ashram or in an air-conditioned classroom in Tokyo. Neither the Japanese author nor her Muslim and secularist mentors in India

have ever managed to pick a hole in the advanced criticism of Christianity and Islam.

Of course, the approach pioneered by Ram Swarup is hard-line in the sense that it is not susceptible to change under the impact of changing political configurations. The BJP and RSS may decide one day that they need to build bridges with padres and mullahs, but that doesn't alter the truth status of the latter's belief systems. The Voice of India approach is unflinching in the same sense in which logic is *sharper* than diplomacy, or uprightness is *tougher* than compromise, or a diamond is *hardier* than mud. But that has nothing to do with harshness and hatred at the human level. I have rarely met such humanly warm people as the authors criticized by our scholar from Tokyo.

12.3. Postmodernism and the facts

But let us now focus on elements in her paper which are problematic. We need not make much of her gullible acceptance of Christian missionary image-building with love and service. If that was all there is to it, there would be no tension in areas of high Christian missionary activity, as any researcher into an ongoing conflict ought to understand. The thought that an aversion to a religion may be based on experience with that religion, or on verifiable facts about that religion, doesn't seem to cross her mind.

And then, like India's true secularists, she goes on to insinuate that the impression of violent tendencies inherent in Islam, is based on mere clichés about jihad which are bandied about by Goel and Shourie.⁸ This, then, is the most serious flaw of her whole argument: the willful confounding of perceptions and facts, of subjective and objective. The jihadic pattern is a central *fact* of Islamic doctrine and history, not somebody's funny little cliché. The violent tendencies of Islam are not a propaganda bandied about by some querrulants, but a daily fact of life for Hindus in Jammu or Dhaka. It is simply impossible to understand Hindu Revivalism for people who are adamant about disregarding or denying these *facts*.

But our aspiring secularist is clearly uncomfortable with facts, as is evident from her diagnosis of the Hindu use and abuse of historical facts. Like all secularists, but with even less camouflage, she has to make do with

insinuations that something is wrong with the historical facts (quote marks hers) cited by Hindu authors, because she is unable to prove any of them false. She can do no more than notice how the destruction of temples, the compulsory conversion and persecution by Islamic rulers, and so forth, are held up for all to see as attesting to the essence of Islam, all but eclipsing the equally historical fact that Islam and Hinduism have enjoyed a peaceful coexistence in many parts of the subcontinent.⁹

Notice how she keeps on putting the word facts in quotation marks, even when referring to something which she herself clearly believes to be factual, i.e. the peaceful coexistence of Islam and Hinduism. That is post modernism for you: there are no facts, only *constructs*. She condemns herself to misunderstanding the Hindu movement which she claims to be studying because she refuses to acknowledge its basis in factual experience, replacing it all with subjective impressions and sheer propaganda. Thus, present conditions in India give *all this talk* of violence and menace by alien cultures and religions a certain appeal to the ordinary people, while the critique of Pakistan is fed by concrete images of the military power of Pakistan affecting the daily life of the people of India.¹⁰

Why not admit straightaway that the violence suffered by Hindus from Pakistan-sponsored terrorists is a plain fact and therefore also a legitimate Hindu concern? Either there is something fishy about the facts, and in that case an author conveying an opinion about them to the readers should spell out clearly how these claimed facts are in dissonance with reality. Or alternatively, if no fault can be found with these facts, they should simply be treated as facts. Finally, if an author has no time or space to verify and discuss the reality of the alleged facts, a humble admission should be made that it is simply too early for him or her for a serious evaluation of policies and discourses based on them. But the entire corpus of secularist writing on the Hindu Revivalist position vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam violates this simple rule.

12.4. Criticism and violence

In four whole pages devoted specifically to the violence aspect of the Goel/Shourie critique, Mitsuhiro Kondos text meanders around the

definition of Hindu nationalism (a term which she finds more appropriate than Hindu fascism or Hindu fundamentalism), but shifts her attention from the said authors altogether to focus on Veer Savarkars much-discussed booklet *Hindutva* (1923) instead. And while Savarkar was all for militarization of the Hindus (which is not the same thing as sheer violence, but let that pass), even then she doesn't manage to show any link between Hindu nationalist doctrine and its alleged violent edge.

So, we are left with no choice but to conclude with a rather different kind of quotation. As a Japanese, Miss Kondo informs us that she or any of her compatriots is too close ideologically to the Indian (...) to claim that the Hindu nationalists critique of monotheism is *completely and radically different* from the consciousness that informs the everyday religious, cultural, political and economic life of Japan.¹¹ So, both Hindus and Japanese are too sane and mentally relaxed to get obsessed with the unicity of God and the need to destroy His multiplicity among communities who have not yet been infected with that obsession.

And finally, we learn that the fundamental rationality of the ideology of Hindu nationalism has, at least in part, already won for itself the approval of history. Indeed: As many scholars have pointed out, it would be far off the mark to dismiss the Hindu nationalist movement as a merely reactionary or fanatic and deviant movement of the poor or deprived brainwashed by grotesque teachings.¹² If any expression could sum up what animates Ram Swarup, Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie and related authors in their critique of monotheism, it would precisely be their caring concern for fellow human beings brainwashed by grotesque teachings.

Footnotes:

¹Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, in *Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato: The Unfinished Agenda. Nation Building in South Asia*, Manohar, Delhi 2001, p.79.

²She even praises Gyan Pandey for his clear, terse prose in which he berates the Hindu nationalists for differing with Mahatma Gandhi

(Mitsuhiko Kondo: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.92). My own opinion of Pandey's insight into Hinduism is less deferential. I recall a column of his in the early days of the Ayodhya controversy, where he argued that reclaiming the Rama-Janmabhoomi site would be similar to claiming Sri Lanka on the plea that Rama had taken possession of it. In fact, one of the central messages of Ramayana lore is that Rama refused to take possession of Lanka: after liberating his wife Sita, he left the Lankans to their own devices and handed over the throne to Ravana's brother who was the only member of Ravana's family to survive. This is not a peripheral detail but a highly significant application of the Hindu theory of sovereignty: all nations and communities, even conquered states, should be given their autonomy and the freedom to maintain their own mores and traditions (*svadharma*). This contrasts favourably with the Islamic approach of imposing Islam and suppressing (or at least gradually suffocating) the native culture.

³Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.79.

⁴Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.84.

⁵Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.88.

⁶Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.88.

⁷Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.95.

⁸Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.81-82.

⁹Mitsuhiko Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato: The Unfinished*

Agenda, p.83.

[10](#) Mitsuhiro Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, P.84-85; emphasis added.

[11](#) Mitsuhiro Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, p.97; emphasis in the original.

[12](#) Mitsuhiro Kondô: *Hindu nationalists and their critique of monotheism*, P.97.

13. Postscript: A Lasting Solution

13.1. Say it with poetry

It happened a whole decade ago, but the method could still be tried out today. In the dying days of Khalistani terrorism, secularist Prime Minister V.P. Singh visited Panjab and proposed as his solution for terror and separatism this colourful formula: We must open the treasury of our hearts. He was indulging in mere poetic sentimentalism to avoid facing the real problem of Khalistani terrorism. But it is true that the Sikh masses had kept the treasury of their hearts open and felt hurt when the Hindus were victimized. And a few years later, Khalistan was only a bad memory.

So who won Panjab back? There is no doubt that Khalistani terrorism was defeated by the courage and steadfastness of K.P.S. Gill and other men in uniform, many of whom gave their lives in the effort. However, some people in cosier places decide in favour of the eloquent Prime Minister: poetry defeated the Kalashnikov.

One these privileged people is Amit Jayaram who knows that Indias secularism has to appeal to Hinduism to turn Hindus in general against its vanguard, Hindu Revivalism. He has tried his armoury on the Ayodhya controversy with the poem: Lets build a temple.¹ I will only reproduce a few interesting fragments for savouring and comment.

Lets build a temple to Lord Rama.

Lets build the temple in our hearts,

A goodly temple, soft and gentle,

In peace, without these fits and starts.

None dare object to that. indeed, the secularist campaigners ought to ask themselves, daily before going to bed: How many bricks did I lay up today for this temple of gentleness in my heart? Now that they are preaching

about how true Hinduism amounts to secularism, they too ought to build this temple in their hearts, chiselling away all the calumnies and hatred which have disfigured their discourse for too long. Instead of clamouring for Stalinist hard secularism, they should develop a kinder, gentler secularism: dialogue with the Kar Sevaks or, better still, listening sessions where they shut their own mouths and sincerely try to get a fair understanding of what Hindu Revivalism is all about.

And why should peace surround only the construction of the temple in the heart? Let us be more ambitious and bring peace even where the Rama temple of stone is built. Only one factor is standing in the way of peace in Ayodhya: secularist-backed Islamic intransigence against the proper Hindu adornment of a Hindu sacred site. I am happy to enroll Amit Jayaram in the coalition of people who are trying to make the Muslim-secularist fanatics see reason, provided he means what he says in the following lines:

Lets build it, in our Hindu vein,

Without a trace of hate or blame

Lets build it with red bricks of love

And light in it compassions flame.

Note how Amit Jayaram finds something typically Hindu in hatelessness, love and compassion. To be sure, there is room for blame somewhere. If this controversy exists, it is because someone at some point decided to trespass against the religious arrangement established on that hill in Ayodhya. Someone demolished the temple, and he is to blame, along with the prophet or doctrine that made him do it. Alright, in moments of religious focus and serenity we should keep mundane thoughts of guilt and blame outside our consciousness. But when coming down to earth, we should not delude ourselves that all the religious forces in the field are equally benevolent. He goes on:

We do not need to etch our faith

With iron on the stones of time

Its all around, within, without

It needs no mortar, bricks or lime.

The poet has a point: the dharma is the essence of the universe. It was there long before anyone built temples or wrote poetry, well before Prophet Mohammed intoned the Quran, and long before the Muslim conquerors thought it necessary to impose a structure of brick and mortar onto a Hindu sacred site. You can conceive of the dharma as immaterial, without name or form, without qualities.

However, there is no need to *confine* it to this disembodied existence, nor is it lowered or deformed by giving it a tangible shape once in a while. Emptiness is not different from form, nor is form different from emptiness, as the *Heart Sûtra* says. Many Hindus have practised religion without temples or idols for thousands of years, but many others have decided it was right as well as feasible to express their experience of the Divine in specific shapes of sculpture and architecture. Temples are not necessary, but neither is the absence of temples that stratospheric bricklessness to which Amit Jayaram is so attached. To say that Hindus dont need a temple just when Muslims are trying to deny them the right to build a temple sounds like devious Gandhian submissiveness to the bully: too proud to admit to cowardice, but cowardly all the same. We conclude quoting him the following lines:

We do not need to stress, define

Our faith against anothers creed

One of the worlds most ancient faiths

Has no need to resort to greed.

Exactly. Hinduism was there all along, and never needed an Other against which to define itself. This is in contrast with Islam, which defined itself from the start as the mortal enemy of the traditional religion of Arabia and of all other religions. In its core vow, Islam swears to eradicate all God-concepts except Allah and narrows down the ways of knowing God to

the so-called revelations transmitted through Prophet Mohammed. Hindus will find it heartening to read a secularists plea for the Hindu and against the Islamic approach.

As for greed, this word means desiring what is not yours or desiring what you dont need. According to Jayaram, the Islamic conquerors were guilty of greed when they took temple sites from the Hindus. That is certainly not the whole explanation, as religious zeal had a lot to do with it too, but let that pass for now. So, the Muslims took what was not theirs because they were greedy. it does not follow that this is a conflict between two greedy parties.

Greed means: wanting what is not yours. It does not mean: keeping or reclaiming what is yours. By definition, a robber is greedy. His protesting victim, by contrast, may or may not be a greedy person, but he is not proven to be greedy merely by his protesting against the crime. In reclaiming the Rama-Janmabhoomi site, Hindus have no need to resort to greed. Amit Jayaram, like most secularists, easily lapses into the symmetry fallacy, the facile assumption of moral equivalence. Well, there is no equivalence between Islamic aggression and Hindu self-respect.

13.2. Reject the Indonesian model

Shortly after taking office as RSS Sarsanghchalak, K.S. Sudarshan gave a speech in which he developed an idea which had already been popular for long among soft-line RSS ideologues: Indian Muslims should follow the example of their Indonesian co-religionists. These, he said, are Muslims who tell the Ramayana to their children and who dont mind a little Hindu symbolism in the background, particularly Ganesha and the Garuda bird. If only the Indian Muslims could be like that, Sudarshan mused. For one thing, they would then entertain a certain veneration for the Ramajanmabhoomi site, so the whole Ayodhya dispute would be resolved at once.

What is wrong with this idyllic picture? First of all, the empirical fact is that even in Indonesia, this open-minded and Hindu-minded Islam is in decline. The remaining Hindus in Indonesia have the good fortune of living separate from the Muslims on their own island (Bali), but with the ongoing

Muslim Javanese immigration there, their peace is by no means guaranteed. As the massacres of Christians in Ambon and Sulawesi demonstrate, the Indonesian variety of Islam is acquiring the same fanaticism and cruelty as its Pakistani counterpart has always had. Does Sudarshan want Indian Muslims to emulate their Pakistani brothers?

Secondly, the Indonesian Muslims, even if open-minded and respectful of Hinduism, are at any rate Muslims. Their ancestors gave up Hinduism, Buddhism or Animism to embrace Islam. A case may be made (Sudarshan avoided making it) that these conversions were insincere, prompted as they were by physical force or social pressure. But fact remains that most Indonesians are now Muslims and not Hindus. Sudarshan sees them as beaming a message: Indian Muslims, respect Hindu tradition like we do. However, the message they are sending might just as well be read as: You Hindus, convert to Islam like we did.

Thirdly, as Muslims, Indonesians feel united with a billion people who dont share their nationality but do share their religion. Sudarshan and other RSS spokesmen like to tell Indian Muslims that they should join the Indian mainstream, and that they would profit from becoming part of a bigger community. But if there is any virtue in joining a larger mainstream, why choose the Hindu mainstream, roughly limited to just one (admittedly big) country, rather than the larger Islamic mainstream?

Muslim leaders made short work of Sudarshans daydream by pointing out that the logic of joining the mainstream yields a good reason for staying within Islam. Or even, in the case of Hindus, for abandoning their religion and joining Islam. If all the Hindus converted to Islam, India would be the leader of the Islamic world, custodian of the Islamic Bomb, and, reunited with Pakistan and Bangladesh, the most populous country in the world, free of all this wasteful Hindu-Muslim tension.

The nationalist discourse which avoids questions of religious doctrine, inevitably fails in convincing Muslims to be more Hindu-friendly or India-patriotic. On the contrary, it offers new reasons for preferring Islam to Hinduism. The reason for rejecting Islam is not political, is not a matter of national unity and greatness. Rather, it is doctrinal, it is a matter of truth. If Prophet Mohammeds belief system is true, then all Hindus should convert

to Islam, and Indias identity be damned. If it is untrue, all Muslim inside and outside India should give up Islam.

13.3. No more Ayodhya disputes

I have said it before and I need not apologize for repeating it here: it is useless to stir up controversies by demanding that temple sites with mosques on them be given back to the Hindu Gods from whom they were stolen by Islamic onslaught. The Ayodhya struggle has been fun, so to speak, or at least it has been a very instructive episode, but as a general rule, the Hindu position regarding Islam should not be focused on real estate disputes.

A good side-effect of the Ayodhya dispute has been the increased awareness about the ongoing debate over Indian history-writing. The eminent historians have been complaining that the writers of evidence-based history are polluting the stream of history scholarship. Those who are too remote from the available sources or not intellectually equipped or simply too lazy to verify these claims may well be taken in by this allegation. Those who care to inquire, however, are bound to find that it the other way around: it is the eminent historians who have polluted the channels of history teaching with their systematic distortions. I dare hope that the present volume has contributed to exposing their fraud.

The most important lesson which I personally have drawn from my involvement with the Ayodhya debate and my acquaintance with Indias communal conflict is that the real struggle is not over real estate, nor really over history textbooks, but over a fundamental religious and philosophical commitment. The problem with Indian Muslims regarding Ayodhya is ultimately not their aggression and unreasonable claims over what is not theirs; rather, it is their belief in a religion which sanctions such behaviour. The point is not getting the Muslims out of Ayodhya, it is getting Islam out of the Muslims.

One attempt in this direction, and one of which a Hindutva leader like Sudarshan must be aware, was pioneered by the Hindu reformist movement, the Arya Samaj: Shuddhi or purification from *adhârmika* entanglements. In common English, it would be termed conversion, or in a

larger historical perspective, reconversion of Indian Muslims to their ancestral tradition. Though it was only in the late 19th century that the Arya Samaj devised the programme of reconversion, the practice has been attested here and there since the earliest days of Muslim rule in parts of India. People forcibly converted to Islam were welcomed back into Hindu society after going through a purification ritual.

However, as a matter of historical fact, the Shuddhi movement was not a great success. One problem was the inertia of Hindu society, which did not go out of its ways to make the reconverted Muslims feel at home. Another was that the national or ancestral argument for reconversion to one national religion was not good enough. If Islam is the true religion, sacrificing the link with nation and ancestors may be a fair price to pay in order to establish a link with God. Every single Muslim has a history of severing the link with his national heritage, either he himself or someone in his family tree. So, all it took for Islamic propaganda (*tabligh*) activists to immunize Muslims against the lure of Shuddhi was to remind them of the truth claims of Islam. What we have to do now is to take them at their word and examine these truth claims. Once Islam has been disproved for all to see, it is only a matter of time before it will implode. With modern communication, it should not be difficult to provide a billion Muslims with the data necessary to make them doubt and reject the Islamic beliefs.

In a world-wide perspective, all Muslims should explore their own way out of Islam, depending on local heritage as well as on the gifts of modernity. Westerners are going through the same experience: believing in the bizarre dogmas of Christianity is no longer tenable, so we are groping around for new answers to the spiritual needs of Western man and of mankind in general. Numerous individuals in the Muslim world are going through the same process of emancipation from irrational beliefs.

No one can do it for them, they will have to free their minds from the ideological conditioning instilled in them from childhood. Non-Muslims can help them in this process by ensuring that the best scholarship debunking Islamic beliefs is made available to all, and by opposing and thwarting policies which shield Islam from rational scrutiny and strengthen the hold of obscurantist leaders over their flock. It also helps if the Hindus

set an example by freeing their own tradition from some superstitious deadwood.

The end result will be that the Muslims abandon Islam and the claims made on behalf of Islam. They will gladly bring the stolen sacred sites back into Hinduism. And they themselves will build a temple in Ayodhya for Rama, the god who redeems the victims of kidnapping. Rama will free the Hindus who were forced into Islam, and their children who were mentally chained by Islamic indoctrination until they became the Indian Muslim community. He will take them back with him to his birthplace Ayodhya, to celebrate.

Footnotes:

| [1](#)Amit Jayaram: *Lets build a temple, A Temple in Ayodhya and Other Poems*, Rupa, Delhi 1993, p-5-6.

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